

Personal Safety - Councillors Guide

The relationship between Councillors and their communities is 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 enhancing that relationship. This guide aims to help Councillors carry out their role safely and effectively.

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. 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.

Car Safety and Parking

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;
- Lock the car doors when you get into the car;
- Take boxes/bags to the car when other people are around;
- 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.

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. For example, it is worth having some tissues on hand.

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 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 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 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.

Ward Surgeries

Where ward surgeries are held, 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. What follows are suggestions about how to make a surgery safe and effective. Most Councillors will go through their entire service on the Council without experiencing any problems but a little time given to preparation and planning can reduce the already small risk further.

The Basics

1	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 also makes it much easier to manage a busy surgery. If you are currently doing surgeries alone, discuss how this can be changed with fellow Councillors or Council Officers.
2	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).
3	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.
4	Make sure there are no heavy items in the room that could be used as weapons.
5	Inform the Police when and where your surgeries are held.
6	<p>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 as possible of the following features:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Council premises (e.g. community centres) 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:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ 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 call for assistance;○ Has 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.

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 as to how to contact Councillors and details of ward surgeries reduces the chances of unwanted callers.

Mail

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

Home Visits

Councillors do sometimes visit residents in their homes, especially those who are elderly, disabled or where they simply want to see for themselves the 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 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.

Malicious and Nuisance Telephone Calls

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 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.

Reporting Incidents

Any incidents of concern, even if fairly minor or 'near-misses', should be reported to the Police and Head of Democratic Services. This enables the authority to undertake proper monitoring and decide if any action is needed to prevent a recurrence. You may also consider it advisable to warn ward colleagues.

Emergency Contact Details

It is advisable to provide this information to the Head of Democratic Services should it be necessary to contact your family / next of kin in the event of an emergency.