



Personal Safety A Guide for Councillors

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Approvals

Name	Title	Date of Approval	Version No
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The Role of Councillors and their Personal Safety

There are two areas covered by this guidance:

- general health and safety; and
- managing risks when working in the community.

In the first instance, '*Health and Safety in the Council - Councillor Workbook*' published by the Local Government Association is recommended reading. It is concise but wide-ranging and touches upon personal safety and details how decision making may influence risk areas. A copy is embedded here – click on the icon to open it:



LGA Councillor Workbook Health and Safety in the Council.pdf

Personal safety

Personal safety while going about your role in the community is a specific risk area and whilst contacts with the public usually are rewarding and non-adversarial you may find yourself having to calm down angry and frustrated residents, possibly face-to-face and alone.

This information sheet sets out what personal safety measures can be taken to prevent and deal with those circumstances when you may be anxious for your safety.

Surgeries

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 consider teaming up with other councillors or holding joint surgeries with your district counterparts.

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 as seating directly opposite can be confrontational.

If there is no separate waiting room, try to ensure that waiting constituents are as far as possible away from those whom you are talking to. Make sure there are no heavy items in the room that readily 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 as possible of the following features:

- 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.

Try to ensure the surgery (meeting) 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 calls 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.

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 e.g. it is worth having some tissues on hand. Calmness in the face of whatever comes up will help you and your constituents.

If racist or other offensive remarks 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 judgement if you are alone and in a vulnerable situation.

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 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.

- It is important that a tracing system is in place that enables your employer/colleagues to know where you are and who you are with at all times.
- In the absence of a lone working system, establish a 'buddy' to call you 10 minutes into any meeting with a new client to check that you are ok and feel comfortable with them. Have a predetermined code word ready in case you want to summon help

- Give some thought before you arrive as to what exit strategies you could use if you felt uncomfortable or threatened.
- Conduct your own risk assessment on the door step before you enter. If you feel at all uncomfortable or unsure, make an excuse and leave. Trust your instincts.
- Be mindful of the fact that you are entering someone else's territory. Your presence there may be unwanted and/or pose a threat.
- As you enter, make a note of how the door opens and closes so that you can leave quickly, if necessary.
- Give the client an idea of how long the meeting will take and try to adhere to this.
- Risk assessments should be carried out by your employer to identify any risks related to the people, environment or tasks involved in your job.
- You also need to be able to make quick risk assessments yourself, which can help you decide how safe a situation is and what action you should take to avoid danger.

Lone Working

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

- leaving details of where you are going and how long you will be with a friend or relative;
- carrying a personal alarm or have one fitted in the meeting room. Other staff should know how to respond if the alarm sounds;
- making regular check-in calls to a friend or relative or asking them to call you at regular intervals;
- teaming up with another person 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 ask another councillors or an officer for their view on whether a visit should be undertaken.

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 stating how to contact Councillors and providing details of your surgeries reduces the chances of unwanted callers.

Malicious and Nuisance Telephone Calls

Although nuisance 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 gender, age, accent, etc;
- listen for any clues about 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 via H&S/HR Officer

Mail

Malicious/ anonymous letters should be given immediately to the police along with any other evidence that may be associated with the correspondence e.g. background to the subject that has prompted the letter.

Social Media

- Always think of your personal safety first when using ICT or your mobile phone. Remember it is easy for anyone to lie about who they are online, so you can never really be sure about who you are talking to.
- Do not give out any personal information about yourself online to people you do not know. This includes your full name, address, street name or postcode. Only ever give out your location as Melton.
- Never give your contact number to anyone who you don't know.
- It's a good idea to use a nickname rather than your real name.
- Don't meet people that you have only spoken to online. If you do decide to meet up with anyone in real life then make sure you meet in a public place at a busy time.
- Never give out pictures online or over a mobile unless you know the person in real life. It is easy for people to take your pictures and alter them, send them on, or even pretend to be you with them.
- Always use private settings whenever you are setting up a social networking page or an Instant Messenger (IM) account. This is so people who you don't want to see your profile can't.
- Anything you post or upload to the internet is there forever so be very careful what you put online.
- Never go onto webcam with people you don't know in real life. Webcam images can be recorded and copied and also shared with other people.
- If you receive any messages or pictures that worry or upset you talk to the H&S/HR Officer. You may also report it online, via the thinkuknow website <http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk>

Driving and Parking

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

- 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 in a position facing the way you want to drive off;
- in a cul de sac, turn and park facing the exit route;
- 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;
- remember not to leave sensitive information, laptops etc unattended in the car.

Public transport

- Obtain timetable and fare information before travelling to prevent waiting around for long periods at bus stops or stations.
- When waiting for public transport after dark, try to wait in well-lit areas and near emergency alarms and CCTV cameras.
- Plan ahead. Think about how you are going to get home, e.g. What time does the last bus/train leave?
- Try to carry the telephone number of a licensed taxi or minicab firm with you at all times or add a suitable booking app to your phone.
- When making a booking, ask for the driver and/or car details and confirm them when the cab arrives. Also ask the driver whose name the taxi/cab is booked under.
- When you are in the cab, avoid giving out any personal details.

Walking

- Try to use well-lit, busy streets and use the route you know best. Avoid subways or isolated car parks. Walk down the middle of the pavement if the street is deserted.
- Try to walk against oncoming traffic to avoid kerb crawlers. **If you do have to walk in the same direction as the traffic** and a vehicle pulls up suddenly alongside you, turn and walk or run in the other direction.
- **If you think you are being followed**, trust your instincts and take action. As confidently as you can, cross the road, turning to see who is behind you. If you are still being followed, keep moving. Make for a busy area and tell people what is happening. If necessary, call the police.
- **Beware of someone who warns you of the danger of walking alone** and then offers to accompany you. This is a ploy some attackers have been known to use
- **Consider carrying a personal safety alarm**, which can be used to shock and disorientate an attacker giving you vital seconds to get away.

Reporting incidents

In MBC, the best means of recording incidents is to email the HR and H&S Officer with the details. Data is used for detecting trends, hotspots and priorities for support and intervention.

Sources of further information

<http://www.suzylamplugh.org/>

https://leics.police.uk/media/uploads/library/file/personal_safety_leaflet.pdf

For further advice and guidance:

Tel 01664 502593 or email the Health and Safety/HR Officer at Melton Borough Council.