

## **Personal safety – a guide for councillors**

### References:

- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
- The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (as amended)
- Instruction 6 to this policy – Violence at work (VAW)
- Instruction 14 to this policy – Lone workers.

### **Introduction**

It is important that councillors keep in touch with their communities; this includes helping individuals with problems they might have. Often, this extends beyond just the delivery of council services. 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.

### **Ward surgeries**

The arrangements that 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.

Councillors should consider the following:

- Avoid holding 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.
- 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 – that is, 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 who you are talking to.
- 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 as possible of the following features:
  - council premises (for example, libraries) during opening hours or other premises where there are 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 (interview) 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. For example, it is worth having some tissues on hand.

Councillors have to develop the 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 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 via a friend or family member. If necessary, you can let the person who you are visiting know there is such a record or that you are expected at another place by a certain time, or make a call on your mobile phone during the visit.

## **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.

## **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, and so on.
- 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 (for example, railway sounds, industrial noises, machinery, music, animals).
- Inform the Police.
- Inform the Service Manager (Democratic Services).

## **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.

## **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.

## **Reporting incidents**

Any incidents of concern, even if fairly minor or 'near-misses', should be reported to the Service Manager (Democratic Services), who in turn will report it via the normal reporting procedure to the Health and Safety Manager. 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.

## **Training**

The authority does run training courses to enable delegates to implement effective intervention techniques to avoid aggressive and violent behaviour; these courses are available to councillors and appear in Members' News.

## **Counselling**

The authority does provide a confidential counselling service for members affected by incidents that cause them stress at work.

## **Further information**

Further information can be found in the council's Health and Safety Policy or via the Health and Safety Manager.