

PERSONAL SAFETY A GUIDE FOR COUNCILLORS

The relationship between Councillors and the communities they serve 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 making that relationship work. The following advice is based on that issued by the Local Government Association and aims to help Councillors carry out their role safely and effectively.

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 residents who are angry and frustrated by treating them with respect and sympathy.

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 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 each Councillor makes will vary according to local circumstances and it will be a fortunate Councillor who can find premises for their surgery which meets every aspect of good practice which is also accessible for their constituents.

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

The basics:

- 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.
- 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 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 sitting directly opposite someone can be confrontational.
- If there is no separate waiting room, try to ensure that the waiting constituents are as far away as possible from those whom you are talking to.

- Make sure there are no heavy items in the room that could be used as weapons.
- Before the surgery commences, check that you have a signal on your mobile phone as you can get blind spots. In addition, ensure that you have easy access to a land line.

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 (eg 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 (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 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.

'Ad-hoc' Visits by Constituents to Town Hall/Eric Manns Building

You may be pressured into meeting constituents because they arrive at either the Town Hall or Eric Manns building because they want an immediate response to their concern or query. In these circumstances caution should be exercised, particularly if the person is aggravated or 'wound up'. If you do need to meet them ensure an officer accompanies you with the constituent – even if they are outside the door where the meeting is taking place and on hand to give assistance if needed.

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 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.

Racist incidents must be reported to via the Council's Hate Incident form intranet site or via the Gail Wilcock, Hate Crime Officer on 01709 334550.

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. You must let people know where you are, what time to expect you back, your contact details, who you are seeing, when you have finished your visit and away from the site.

If considered necessary, Councillors can contact the Secretariat team who have access to the Council's 'Violence Register' database.

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 callers

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 policy 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 (eg railway sounds, industrial noises, machinery, music, animals)
- Inform the police
- Inform the Council

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.

If malicious emails are sent do not delete them as they may be material evidence. Any malicious emails should be reported to the RBT IT Service Desk on (01709) 336300.

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 your 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 Emergency and Safety Team. 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. If you need assistance in doing this, please contact a member of the secretarial team.

Notification of Known Violent Customers

Occasionally, the Emergency and Safety Team are notified of individuals who 'pose a risk' to Council employees. In these circumstances, an email will be sent to the Elected Members who serve the particular ward the person is known to reside in. This will more than likely only be basic information – name and address of person, age and description (if known) but it will be enough to enable you to avoid putting yourself at risk. If you have any doubts or would like some advice, please do not hesitate to contact the emergency and Safety Team.

Training

Local Authorities have responsibilities for the safety of Councillors while on council business as they do for their officers. Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council has a policy and guidelines for lone working.