



Elected Members' guide to

Lone Working and Personal Safety

Issue 2

January 2020

1. Introduction

An important role of Elected Members (Councillors) is to be accessible to their constituents. This can include contact via telephone or email, but can also include face to face contact with constituents, for example, by holding ward surgeries, making visits to people's homes, or when receiving people at Council premises or at their own homes.

Most Councillors will not experience any problems when meeting with their constituents, and even when they do experience aggression or other forms of unacceptable behaviour, it will usually be of a relatively low level.

However there may be instances when a meeting becomes adversarial, placing a Councillor at risk of harm.

The aim of this document is to provide Councillors with guidance on how to assess and manage risk when lone working in situations they are likely to encounter, and on 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.

2. General Safety Measures to Consider

There are measures that can be taken in advance of any prearranged meeting with constituents that can help protect the safety of a Councillor, such as:

- can a face to face meeting be avoided and instead be carried out by telephone or email?
- where possible, arrange any meetings / surgeries during normal working hours and, preferably, during the hours of daylight;
- ensure that you let ward colleagues, family or similar know where you are going to be and what time you are likely to finish;
- ensure that you have access to a telephone to enable you to contact someone for assistance, and that any mobile phone is charged;
- if the constituent is known to you and you are aware that they have a tendency to violent / aggressive or other forms of unacceptable behaviour, then do not arrange to visit them at their home or to meet them at yours, but instead arrange the meeting elsewhere for a time when you can be accompanied by someone, such as a ward colleague or Police Community Support Officer;
- consider purchasing a personal alarm and ensuring it is charged before leaving home.

3. Visiting Constituents in Their Homes

Councillors will sometimes visit constituents in their homes, particularly if the person is known to them, or is elderly or disabled and mobility or other issues make holding a meeting elsewhere problematic.

However, before arranging lone visits to constituents' homes, Councillors should first consider alternative options, such as:

- can the constituent attend a ward surgery?
- can the meeting be arranged in a public place, such as an area of a sports centre when there are other activities taking place in the centre at the same time?
- can another person accompany you, such as a ward colleague or Police Community Support Officer?

When making a lone visit to a constituent's home, there are a number of measures that can be taken to help protect the safety of a Councillor, such as:

- before entering any garden area or similar, check for any dogs and do not enter if there are any present unless they are secured;
- if the resident answers the door in a state of undress, then do not enter and advise them that you will wait outside until they are clothed, or arrange another appointment – which, preferably, should then be other than a lone home visit;
- before entering the property, hold a brief conversation with the resident and whilst doing so assess if the demeanour of the person is making you feel uneasy – which could be a result of signals your brain is picking up on subconsciously and telling you that something 'isn't right' – and, if so, make an excuse for not going in (prepare an excuse for not entering beforehand prior to any lone home visit, such as having just received a phone call / text requiring you to be elsewhere as a matter of urgency);
- before entering the property, ask the resident that any dogs present in the property be secured in a different room to where the meeting will be held and, for the sake of your health, that anyone present refrains from smoking;
- if the resident attempts to lock the door once you are inside, ask if they would be good enough to leave it unlocked – make an excuse, such as you have some files in the car that you may need to get to refer to;
- once inside, assess the demeanour of any other person(s) present and if they make you feel uneasy, make an excuse and leave (prepare an excuse for leaving a meeting early beforehand prior to any lone home visit, such as having to attend another meeting / having to refer the issue to an appropriate officer of the Council);
- try to avoid meeting in a kitchen – there are too many items present that could be used as a weapon;
- during the meeting, try to remain aware of the 'feel' of the situation and if you think it is deteriorating, make an excuse and leave;

- even if the resident exhibits unreasonable behaviour but then calms down, still make an excuse and leave before the behaviour can return and the situation deteriorate further.

If the meeting deteriorates to the extent that you feel you are at risk of immediate physical violence, or a person actually attempts to physically assault you, then try to take measures to protect your safety, such as:

- place physical barriers between yourself and the person;
- continue talking to the person as long as you can, reassuring them that you mean them no harm, and agreeing to resolve the issue you are meeting them on in their favour (even if that will not actually be the case) if it will allow you to leave safely;
- set off your personal alarm if you have one, or try to attract the attention of others by screaming / shouting;
- your first option should always be to try to escape rather than confront your assailant, but if absolutely necessary and as a last resort, use reasonable force to protect yourself.

4. Meeting Constituents at Your Own Home

So as to keep a degree of separation between their public and private lives, many Councillors may well prefer not to arrange for constituents to call at their homes, but instead advise them to contact them by telephone or email or through ward surgeries.

However some Councillors will be happy for constituents to call at their homes, particularly if they know them.

Where Councillors are willing to accept constituents calling at their homes, there are some basic measures that can be taken to help protect their safety, such as:

- discourage people from calling on you uninvited – try to ensure that they only call when a meeting has been arranged at a time convenient to yourself;
- fit a strong door chain / limiter to the entrance door and open the door with the chain / limiter in place;
- do not invite anyone in until you have checked who's at the door and that either they can identify themselves as the person who made the appointment, or you know and trust them and are happy to invite them in on an unarranged basis;
- do not invite anyone in if there is anything about their demeanour that makes you feel uneasy (prepare an excuse for not inviting them in beforehand prior to any arranged meeting at your home, such as a family member having visited unexpectedly);

- where possible, hold the meeting in a room that can be utilised for that purpose and which can be kept as free as possible from items that could be used as weapons;
- whether the meeting has been arranged or you invite someone in on an unarranged basis, try to ensure that there is someone else at home, such as a family member.

5. Holding Ward Surgeries

When Councillors hold ward surgeries, the arrangements each Councillor makes will vary according to local circumstances and the availability of premises, and it may sometimes be difficult to find a venue that provides the best safety measures for a Councillor whilst being the best accessible for constituents.

The following are safety measures for Councillors to consider when holding ward surgeries:

- do not hold ward surgeries alone in an otherwise empty building. Try and get someone to assist you and / or hold the surgery in an occupied building, such as an area of a sports centre when there are other activities taking place in the centre at the same time;
- if you will be relying on a mobile phone for communication, ensure you have a signal in the interview room;
- try to arrange for someone to check on you occasionally;
- have an excuse prepared beforehand for leaving the interview room early should the constituent's demeanour become such that it makes you feel uneasy (such as having to consult a colleague, make a private phone call, or similar).

The interview room itself should preferably and where practicable:

- have easy access to a land line;
- be free from heavy items that could be used as weapons;
- have a door that is not lockable from the inside and incorporating a vision panel giving a clear view of the reception or a public area;
- have an alarm linked to the reception area or another room that will be occupied whilst the surgery is ongoing.

6. Travelling

The safety measures outlined below are for Councillors to consider when travelling, whether that is to / from constituents' homes, ward surgeries or Council premises.

Whatever your mode of travel, always be alert to the environment and potential dangers.

By car:

- ensure that your car is roadworthy and has sufficient fuel;
- obey the Highway Code and road traffic rules;
- don't give lifts to people you don't know;
- try to park in a well-lit area where you feel safe and as near to your destination as possible.

By taxi:

- only use licensed companies;
- try to pre-book;
- where practicable, share with a friend or colleague and sit in the back;
- try to be picked up and dropped off in a well-lit area where you feel safe and as near to your destination as possible.

By public transport:

- know the times of the services;
- where possible, wait in a well-lit area near other people with whom you feel safe;
- have your pass / money ready and available so that you don't need to bring out your purse / wallet;
- carry enough money so that you can order a taxi if you miss the last service;
- try to arrange for someone to meet you at the bus stop / train station.

By cycle:

- ensure your cycle is in good working order;
- wear suitable clothing that won't get tangled, something fluorescent, such as a hi-viz vest, and a cycling helmet;
- always use lights;
- concentrate on the road whilst cycling and avoid talking / listening to music / using a mobile;
- secure your cycle with a good quality chain and padlock in a well-lit area where you feel safe and as near to your destination as possible.

By foot:

- plan your route so that you know where you are going and you avoid areas where you would feel unsafe, particularly at night – take a longer route if it would be safer;
- keep a secure hold on any bag / keep any wallet in an inside pocket, but give up valuables rather than suffer an assault;
- be mindful of distraction crimes – e.g. someone stopping you to ask the time so that they have a better opportunity to assault / rob you;

- avoid using your mobile, since it can be a distraction for you and a target for any thief;
- carry enough money to enable you to call a taxi or catch a bus or train if you feel threatened;
- wear comfortable shoes that you can move quickly in.

7. Situations Where Alcohol is Consumed

There may be instances where Councillors are in situations where they are in the presence of residents when alcohol is being consumed.

Such situations could include, for example:

- formal events where Councillors are attending in their official capacity as representatives of the Council, such as a charity quiz night held in a pub or club;
- informal social events where Councillors are not attending in their official capacity but as residents themselves, such as being in a pub or club or at a barbecue or similar.

It is accepted that consumption of alcohol can lead to a lack of control / inhibition and increased aggression and more extreme or excessive responses in people, particularly if concerning an issue that is important to them and they feel passionate about it.

As such whenever Councillors are in situations where alcohol is being consumed, whether in an official or private capacity, it is important you keep alert for a change for the worse in the demeanour of any person you are interacting with, and be prepared to make excuses to end the conversation and back away. On some occasions it may even be advisable to leave the premises.

Although it is appreciated that it can be difficult on occasions since residents will sometimes approach Councillors over issues when Councillors are out at social events in a private capacity, try not to engage with residents on Council issues when out socially when alcohol is being consumed. Instead ask them if they would be good enough to contact you during your working day.

8. Further Guidance

Other sources of information which Councillors may find helpful are policies developed by the Council's Corporate Health and Safety Team as guidance for employees, specifically:

- HS 13 – Violence at Work Policy;
- HS 22 – Lone Working Policy.

These policies are accessible on the *RCT Source*, under *A-Z of Policies* and also, along with additional information on *Violence at Work* and *Lone Working*, under the relevant topics in the *Safety* part of the *Health, Safety and Wellbeing* section.

Alternatively, copies of policies are available from the Corporate Health and Safety Team (telephone 01443 425531).

Guidance on personal safety is also available from external organisations, such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, accessible on the following link:

www.suzylamplugh.org