

PERSONAL SAFETY A GUIDE FOR COUNCILLORS

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this Guide, therefore, is to set out what personal safety measures can be taken to prevent and to deal with those rare circumstances when a Councillor might find themselves in situations where they become anxious for their safety. Many Councillors will not experience any problems during their term(s) of office, however it's important to spend a little time thinking about preparation and planning – being aware, making early choices to reduce or mitigate these risks.
- 1.2 The Local Government Association also provides practical advice on handling physical abuse and personal security [[CLICK HERE](#)], and it is worth reading these through, as this covers a range of security measures relating to mobile phone security apps and home security systems.

2. WARD WORK & COUNCILLOR SURGERIES

The Basics

- 2.1. Councillors have many important roles and keep in touch with their communities is one of them. 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. However, Councillors are often in a position where they need to calm down angry and frustrated residents who often contact their elected representative when they feel that they have no other avenue to pursue.
- 2.2. Councillors can become skilled and experienced in dealing with angry and frustrated residents, and of course the best way to avoid physical abuse is to be aware that it can happen, make early choices to reduce or mitigate risks and risk-assess your activities both before and during the activity.
- 2.3. Councillors should be aware that the public can (currently) find out where you live / your property details. When you become a Councillor at North Herts, you can confirm if you wish to have your home contact details on the North Herts Council Councillor web page (it's an 'opt-in' system). *However*, this does not extend to the current legal requirements to register your Interests with the Monitoring Officer, via your Register of Interests page on mod.gov. This is based on current legal requirements to disclose this information – as it assists with transparency of Councillors' Interests to ensure there is no conflict with Council decision making. **Nevertheless, if you consider that disclosure of the details of your interests could lead to you or a person connected with you being subject to violence or intimidation, then is it possible to exclude this from the public Register (if the Monitoring Officer agrees). You can discuss any query you have with the Monitoring Officer, or email: monitoring.officer@north-herts.gov.uk**
- 2.4. *Please note, however, that whilst the Council can control what it puts on/ takes off its website – Councillors may need to search and seek the removal of their details from other platforms (such as google).*

Councillor Surgeries

- 2.5. The arrangements each Councillor makes will vary according to local circumstances and in North Herts, these surgeries are, as a rule, held outdoors. This does not mean that this is risk free and the following suggestions will help to make a Surgery safer and more effective.
- 2.6. There will generally be several Councillors (and usually an officer) attending the surgeries; however, the general rule is **don't** hold them on your own.

2.7. Even though surgeries will be held outside:

- ✓ be prepared to deal with a range of emotions by the public
- ✓ be aware of the layout of the area, entry and exit points
- ✓ make sure there are no heavy items surrounding the surgery tent/ table that could be used as weapons
- ✓ make sure you have access to your (charged) phone in case you need to call for assistance
- ✓ if a heated conversation begins, you are within your rights not to have it there and then. If this is something you feel comfortable / able to deal with, you can suggest that they make an appointment to come and see you at the Council offices.
- ✓ Report any incidents of concern, even if fairly minor or “nearly happened” **see below*** .

3 DEALING WITH EMOTIONAL INDIVIDUALS

- 3.1. It is inevitable that some of the people Councillors will meet will be angry or upset. You need to be prepared to handle all types of emotion. Calmness in the face of whatever comes up will help you and your residents. It should be understood, however, that if there is an immediate threat to life, call the police on 999.
- 3.2. It is unfortunately the case that during certain interactions with individuals, that racist, sexist, or other offensive remarks can be made. If they are directed at you, it may not be advisable to respond, as this could only make the situation worse. Instead, bring the discussion to an end as quickly as possible.
- 3.3. If there are more general remarks, you should state that this is not acceptable and that you cannot continue the discussion. Often this will elicit an apology. Otherwise, if in person, ask the person to leave, that you are leaving, or tell the person you are hanging up the phone (and do so). Clearly a Councillor must use your own judgement if you are alone and in a vulnerable situation.
- 3.4. Please note: any hate motivated crimes or incidents should be reported to the Police – via 101. The Council can refer this incident to the Police for you or you can do so directly. You are also encouraged to report details of the abuse if you have the individuals name (and address - if you have them) to the Council via: healthandsafety@north-herts.gov.uk)

4. HOME VISITS

- 4.1. 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. Before arranging a lone home visit, Councillors should always consider alternative options:
- ✓ can contact be made by telephone or email?
 - ✓ can a meeting be arranged in a public place such as a Community Centre or a café?
 - ✓ can the resident attend a Councillor Surgery (if appropriate)?
 - ✓ can a ward colleague, Police Community Support Officer or another person accompany you?

- 4.2. 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. However, if you have any doubts about the safety of the premises you are to visit, and the purpose of the visit is not about the premises itself then arrange for the meeting to take place at a neutral venue.
- 4.3. If a home visit is undertaken, the following general personal safety issues should be considered and planned before the visit:
- ✓ arrange the visit during normal working hours, if possible
 - ✓ if appropriate, check with Health & Safety (email above) to see if this address/person is on the Council's Incident Register. Check at least 3 working days before you are due to go. *You should receive a yes or no as to whether anything is on the Council's Incident Register. **That does not mean it's safe to go to the property, merely that nothing has been registered.***
 - ✓ let somebody know who you are visiting, providing details of address, date and time of visit and expected duration
 - ✓ keep a record of your whereabouts. This might include making a call on your mobile during the home visit, telling the resident that there is such a record or that you are expected elsewhere at a specific time. It would be advisable to let colleagues or family members know when you expect to finish
 - ✓ Agree a code word with that colleague or family member for a telephone call which will alert them that you think you might have a safety problem.
- 4.4 During a home visit, the following specific personal safety issues should be followed:
- ✓ consider calling the person before the meeting to confirm arrangements and establish their mood/state of mind
 - ✓ park your car so that it can be driven away easily
 - ✓ park in a well-lit area near other vehicles, if possible
 - ✓ stay alert when approaching the property, and look around the garden for obvious dangers, for example dogs or prowlers
 - ✓ after knocking, stand back and to the side of the door
 - ✓ if there is a need to look through the letter box, do not look in directly; try to observe from the side
 - ✓ do not stand on the edge of the steps
 - ✓ be aware of potential weapons
 - ✓ ask for any dogs or other pets to be secured away from the meeting, where appropriate
 - ✓ assess the situation and mood of the resident. Also note any other people in the property and their mood
 - ✓ only sit down when the resident does
 - ✓ where possible, sit in an upright chair as this is easier to stand up from and use as a defensive barrier. If you have to sit in an armchair or settee, sit on the edge near the arm. This will enable you to stand up more easily
 - ✓ be aware of any alternative escape routes
 - ✓ if the situation changes and you feel threatened, make an excuse and leave. Back out rather than turning your back on the resident
 - ✓ **if in any doubt or you feel threatened, do not enter, make an excuse and leave.**
- 4.5 What to do if a serious situation occurs:

- ✓ vacate the premises immediately and report the incident to the Police via 999, or 101 as appropriate. Also report it to the Council's email¹
- ✓ if racist or other offensive remarks are made, indicate firmly to the resident that this is not acceptable. If it continues the Councillor should inform them that it will not be possible to continue the home visit

4.6 If a Councillor is unable to leave immediately when a serious situation occurs, the following steps should be taken, as appropriate:

- ✓ place defensive barriers between yourself and the resident
- ✓ continue talking to the resident as long as possible, reassuring them that you mean them no harm
- ✓ use reasonable force to protect yourself, if absolutely necessary, but only as a means of last resort. Escape should always be the first option
- ✓ set off your personal attack alarm, if you have one, or scream or shout to attract the attention of others.

5 THE COUNCIL'S INCIDENT REGISTER

5.1 The Council has a corporate Incident Register. Councillors can contact the designated Officer to provide information about potentially violent persons prior to undertaking a home visit: healthandsafety@north-herts.gov.uk If there is any doubt as to whether to release information to a Councillor, then the Service Director Resources should be contacted and the decision made by them.

6. LONE WORKING

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

- ✓ leave details of where you are going and how long you will be with a friend relative or colleague
- ✓ check that your mobile phone is charged and switched on
- ✓ carry a personal attack alarm
- ✓ consider making regular check-in calls to a friend, relative or colleague or ask them to call you at regular intervals
- ✓ team up with a Councillor from your ward or a neighbouring ward 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 or ask another Councillor or an Officer for their view on whether a visit should be undertaken

7. PERSONAL CALLERS TO COUNCILLORS' PRIVATE HOMES

7.1 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 Councillor Surgeries reduces the chances of unwanted callers.

7.2 Making appointments or 'drop-in' arrangements for residents to see Councillors at their private homes does sometimes occur, usually when the person is well known to

¹ Email details of the abuse/ address/ person to: healthandsafety@north-herts.gov.uk

the Councillor concerned. The relevant steps as detailed in the section above regarding home visits should be followed.

8. MALICIOUS AND NUISCANE TELEPHONE CALLS

8.1 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 the 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
- ✓ get the calls blocked by your provider or via your mobile.

9. MAIL

9.1 As with telephone calls, on rare occasions Councillors can become the target of malicious anonymous letters. If you are sent these directly then any such letters should be forwarded to the Police.

9.2 If these are sent to the Council, addressed to a Councillor then, as a rule the Committee Services staff will review these to check if there appears to be malicious content/ and to warn the Councillor before sending these on. Dependent on the nature of the correspondence (and in consultation with the Councillor) these can then be referred to the Police.

10. CAR SAFETY & PARKING

10.1 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 and try not to park in dark, deserted streets or isolated car parks
- ✓ if you have to park in a multi storey car park, try to park on the ground floor away from stairs and lifts
- ✓ don't stay around for longer than necessary and stay alert at all times
- ✓ always lock the car doors when you get into the car and leaving it
- ✓ take boxes/bags to the car when other people are around
- ✓ always carry a torch with you
- ✓ look around your vehicle as you approach in case someone is crouching down
- ✓ look inside before entering your vehicle to ensure no one is hiding there (even if the doors were locked)

- ✓ 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
- ✓ ensure your vehicle has sufficient fuel for the journey
- ✓ if you are followed in your vehicle, do not get out. Ensure that it is locked, flash your lights and sound the horn to attract attention.

11. ATTENDANCES AT MEETINGS

- 11.1 Councillors have to attend evening meetings which often finish after dark. It is possible that depending on the nature and outcome of the meeting that members of the public may leave feeling angry or upset and remain outside the meeting area. In such instances, Councillors may wish to ask to be accompanied to their car or nearest bus stop by colleagues or officers who also attended the meeting. If waiting in the (DCO) Council building, then a Councillor can move into one of the card-restricted office areas– to minimise the risk of further engagement, whilst waiting to be accompanied (or to wait until situation has calmed down). If a Councillor is waiting for a taxi, you should wait in well-lit areas, preferably inside the building or close to the main entrance. Before entering the taxi ensure it has the relevant licencing plate and they can confirm your booking.

12. REPORTING INCIDENTS

- 12.1 Depending on the severity of the incident, the Councillor involved should contact the Council and if serious, the Police: 999 of immediate threat to life, 101 and or emailing the Council to report this².
- 12.2 By taking appropriate action you may help to prevent a similar incident re-occurring.

13 TRAINING

- 13.1 Personal safety of Councillors is a responsibility of the Local Authority whilst they are on Council business. Therefore, Personal Safety Training for Councillors, including online or social media, is a key component of the Councillor training, and all Councillors should attend.

14 FURTHER SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR COUNCILLORS

- 14.1 Sometimes interactions with individuals or the public can be stressful, even if you are not directly threatened. Please therefore remember that the Council has a Confidential 'employee' assist programme ('EAP') **that Councillors can use. Its free** and around the clock. You can access the EAP by clicking on [PORTAL](#). If you go via the intranet the 'org code' will be part of the log in. However, you can contact the EAP using your phone:

- ✓ Freephone UK: 0808 196 2016
- ✓ WhatsApp: Text 'Hi' to 087 369 0010

² Email details of the abuse/ address/ person to: healthandsafety@north-herts.gov.uk

✓ From abroad: 00353 1518 02770035315180277

- 14.2 You can also download the Spectrum.Life app from your smartphone to access all of the North Herts Be-Well features. You can find the Mobile App by searching for 'Spectrum.Life' in IOS or Android. A user guide for the Spectrum.Life app can be found below.