

PERSONAL SAFETY - A GUIDE FOR COUNCILLORS – based on Wrexham CC document

Introduction

The relationship between you and your community is at the heart of what being a Councillor is all about. You will constantly interact with members of your community, either on a face to face basis, at meetings or via email, phone or social media contact. During such contact the members of your community may be discussing problems or concerns with you about Council or other services they use or raising issues about what the Council is doing. They may become upset or angry and you need to know how to manage such situations safely. [how should members of the community be referred to in the guidance – members of the community, residents, individuals, constituents?]

Even though incidents of violence¹ towards public figures are rare, councillors have high profile public roles and may become the victims of verbal or written abuse or may experience harassment and stalking and online abuse.

It is important therefore that you understand the steps you should take to keep yourself safe. The purpose of this guide is not to make you nervous, but to set out what personal safety measures you can take to prevent and to deal with those rare circumstances when you might find yourself in situations where you become anxious for your safety. In general terms this guidance follows advice given to others who, by virtue of public duties or employment, meet many people whom they do not know.

The Council has the following systems which Councillors can access to support them in their role.

- The Corporate Lone Worker System – you need to register as a Lone Worker. If you have done this, you can advise the system of when you have surgery or meeting on your own and the time when you are to finish. The telephone service will contact you if you don't return a call within a certain time. If it gets no response, then an escalation process is instigated.
- The Personal Safety Register - is a list of individuals who have subjected staff to physical or verbal assaults, or where there is a high risk of this occurring. This system spans all services within the Authority ensuring there is a joined up approach to dealing with such individuals. . Councillors can register to access this.
- Incident reporting system available on the Intranet. This should be used for violent incidents (verbal or physical) and also accident, incidents and near misses.

There are also other systems that are available, where the need has been identified, e.g. personal alarms

¹ Work related violence is defined by the HSE as: “**any incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work**”.

Ward Surgeries

These are useful for meeting with individuals from your communities to assist them in sorting out problems or for hearing their views on services or issues.

When arranging the location of your ward surgery[ies] it is important that you consider some basic things, to ensure that you keep yourself safe.

The following are suggestions about how to make a surgery safe and effective. The Personal Safety checklist on page X will also assist you with this.

Remember, 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.

The Basics

- Try not to 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 the Member Support Services [contact details are provided at the end of this guidance.]
- 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 [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 to whom you are talking.
- Make sure there are no **heavy** items in the room that could be used as weapons
- Inform your local neighbourhood police when and where your surgeries are held

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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. community centres) 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 call for assistance

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- 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.
- If your surgery is in a building where no one else is working, arrange with your local neighbourhood police, another councillor or Member Support Services to ring them once you have finished the meeting – but remember to do so! OR register as a Lone Worker and use the Corporate Lone Worker system – but again remember to ring when you have finished your meeting!
- Check the mobile phone signal.

Managing a surgery meeting

Dealing with Emotional or angry Constituents

When dealing with individuals' concerns and problems it is inevitable that some will become upset or angry. You need to be prepared to handle all types of emotions.

You need to develop the skill of being concerned about constituents' problems without becoming so involved that you become too emotional to be of help.

Calmness in the face of whatever comes up will help you and your constituents.

You should also ensure that you keep a "professional" relationship with all individuals and do not become too friendly with them. They are coming to you because of your councillor role.

Dealing with inappropriate language

You may find that during your discussion with an individual they make racist or other offensive remarks. If they are directed at you - do not respond - this will only make the situation worse. If you feel uncomfortable about what is being said, bring the meeting to an end as quickly as possible.

If they are more general remarks, you should state that this is not acceptable and that, if they continue to make such remarks, you will not continue with the meeting. Often this will elicit an apology. Otherwise ask the person to leave.

However, you must use your own judgement and assess what the best thing to do is. if you are alone and in a vulnerable situation do not put yourself at risk no matter how angry the remarks make you.

Exit strategies

On occasions you may become uncomfortable about the way a meeting is going. Preparing for such a situation will help you and it also means that in such a situation you are concentrating on managing the situation rather than thinking about what you need to do.

You could plan the following:

If there's a receptionist on hand agree that if you come out of the room saying a pre agreed sentence – they understand that you want them to interrupt your meeting with an urgent message that you are needed elsewhere. Once this happens, draw the meeting to a close and agree that you will arrange another meeting date.

Length of meeting – ask the receptionist to interrupt.

Bringing a surgery meeting to a close

At the end of the meeting recap on:

- what you have agreed with the individual you will do,
- any timescales and
- how you will contact them next.

If possible, give them a copy of your notes or what you've agreed to do etc.

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.

You need to decide whether a particular visit should be made, especially if the person to be visited is unknown to you. You need to trust your own instincts as to whether to meet someone alone. You might prefer to be accompanied by a ward colleague [don't take a relative or friend with you, as they are not covered by the Council's Code of Conduct and not subject to confidentiality rules]. If the individual is raising concerns about Council services and you are concerned about the contact you've had with them or do not know of them, contact the Violence at Work Co-ordinator – Shane Thomas and ask for him to check if the individual is on the Personal Safety Register or if you have registered to have access this system, check for yourself. 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 or ask another councillor to ring you at a set time and then advise the individual that you need to go to another meeting.

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 as to how to contact you 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, 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 – local neighbourhood police
- Inform the Council – Member Support Services or Monitoring Officer

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. – local neighbourhood 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 on the Incident Reporting System. You may also consider it advisable to warn ward colleagues.

Training

PCC has responsibility for the safety of Councillors while on council business as they do for their officers.

Emergency Contact Details

Upon election you completed an Emergency Contact Details Form and the information is on the Family and Friends page on Trent. You need to ensure that these details are accurate, so that should it be necessary to contact your family/next of kin in the event of an emergency, we use correct information.

Useful PCC Contact Details:

The main enquiry lines are:

- Reception: 01597 827460 / 0845 6027030
- Environmental Health: 01597 827467 / 0845 6027037
- Highways and refuse: 01597 827465 / 0845 6027035

- Housing repairs: 01597 827464 / 0845 6027034
- Powys People Direct (social services): 01597 827666
- Self Service: 01597 826000

- Out of hours (emergencies only): 01597 825275 / 0845 0544847

Information on the Council's Intranet:

Lone Worker Form – you need to complete this to be added to the Corporate Lone Worker System:

[Link to Lone Worker Form](#)

Corporate Lone Worker System - Step by Step Instructions – once registered as a Lone Worker you can use the system:

[Link to Corporate Lone worker System](#)

Personal Safety Register – you need obtain access rights and whenever you wish to access the Register log into the Intranet to access the Register:

[Link to Personal Safety Register](#)

Incident Reporting Form:

[Link to Incident Reporting Form](#)

Other useful information:

Welsh Local Government Association [WLGA] : <https://www.wlga.wales/personal-safety-for-members>

Links to the following are available from the above:

- Personal Safety Guidance for Councillors: The Local Government Information Unit LGIU guidance.
- Personal Safety Advice: The Susie Lamplugh Trust which covers for example canvassing and campaigning, dealing with aggression, stalking, lone working, personal alarms, hate crime and internet safety
- Online Abuse Guidance for Councillors: WLGA guidance for dealing with online abuse
- Get Safe Online guidance - information on online safety from the government supported website, Get Safe Online.
- Recognising the Terrorist Threat Guidance - The national counter terrorism security office information about dealing with suspect packages and knowing what to do in the event of terrorist threats.

Personal Safety checklist

Running a Safe Surgery – Risk Assessment

Members hold surgeries and meetings with constituents in a wide range of locations and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to security. Nevertheless, there are some practical points to consider, many of which are likely to be relevant – and remember **REVIEW each surgery after it has finished – do you need to change anything?**

Think about the following	Tick
Liaise with and get to know local neighbourhood police and, if applicable, any on-site security staff; ensure that these contacts know the dates and times of surgeries.	
Ensure that a partner/colleague/friend is aware of the location of proposed meetings and the expected time of return; have a prearranged system of what to do if that time has passed; carry a mobile phone/phone card and ensure that someone is notified if there is a change of plan, you are delayed, or that you have returned safely.	
Wherever possible have someone else present during meetings so that they can assist or call for help if necessary.	
If Registered as a Lone Worker use the Corporate Lone Worker system for your surgery. Remember to contact the service at the end of the session	
Check the mobile phone signal in the room and other parts of the building which you will use.	
When choosing a venue also identify a safe area with an escape route which can be used in an emergency.	
Ensure that the table or desk to be used is positioned between you and your constituent and that your chair is nearest the door/exit and ensure that your pathway is not blocked, for example by furniture, if you need to leave in an emergency.	
Remove any articles that could be used to cause harm e.g. water glasses and jug; or sharp objects.	
Have a plan for what you and your colleagues would do in an emergency and review it with them regularly.	
If appropriate leave the door ajar; or use a room with a door with a view panel; never lock yourself into a room with a stranger.	

Think about the following	Tick
Agree a key phrase to alert staff in the event of an emergency.	
Have a mobile phone at hand with a pre-dialled number for use to call for assistance.	
If using a regular venue, consider installing a panic button, preferably attached to a monitored alarm system.	
If you are arranging to meet a constituent you have concerns about, consider the option of arranging the meeting in a Council managed location such as County Hall, Neuadd Brycheiniog, Brecon, Neuadd Maldwyn, Welshpool or Library where there are arrangements in place for visitors and an individual can be screened on arrival.	
Consider the risks of advertising your whereabouts in advance on social media (e.g. Twitter) where your intended movements can be monitored anonymously by fixated individuals.	
Ensure your GPS is disabled on social media apps such as Facebook that have public access that enable your movements to be tracked.	
Make sure you alert the Monitoring Officer and or Members Services if you start to receive threatening or malicious communications from individuals or groups as this merits further investigation. The Member Support Unit or you [if you have access rights] can access the Personal Safety Register which includes details of individuals who have been found to have threatened or assaulted members of staff. This Register is updated regularly, with names both removed and added. You can ask the Monitoring Officer if you have any concerns about a person who may be included within the Register; or raise with the Monitoring Officer concerns that can be investigated about a person who has been threatening and violent to you.	
Where a constituent requests a meeting concerning a grievance against the Council, it is suggested that the Service Area be contacted prior to any meeting to confirm factual information. If there has been threatened or actual violence to Council staff, Councillors will be informed and appropriate steps taken e.g. only meet in Council premises, have two persons present.	

Think about the following	Tick
Do not carry cash or valuables and do not openly display 'desirable' objects such as mobile phones, laptops etc. If challenged, comply with any demand to hand over valuables.	
If there is a confrontation and members of the public are abusive or violent, contact the Police where appropriate, but ensure that an Incident Report is completed. It is foreseeable that staff will also be required to deal with this person following your meeting and they may need to be informed that there is a grievance and potential for abuse/violence.	

Your Safety Out & About

Think about the following	Tick
As a recognisable figure, you may be stopped by constituents or others in the street and other public places. In such circumstances it is important to adopt a pragmatic approach to your personal safety and where applicable, that of your family and your staff.	
Be conscious of people's body language and behaviour, trust your instincts and remove yourself from the situation if something does not feel right.	
Do not isolate yourself.	
Do not arrange to meet an unknown constituent without staff/colleague/partner or friend knowing where you are, how long you expect to be and how to contact you.	
Report suspicious behaviour, concerns or threats to the Police.	

Security At Home

It is important to be aware of your surroundings at home and at your office and to encourage your family and staff to do the same so that unusual or suspicious behaviour may be easier to spot. You may also wish to consider the following:

Think about the following	Tick
Check security and robustness of external doors and consider fitting lever mortice deadlocks to external doors if replacing; ensure windows are fitted with a good lock appropriate for the window type.	

Check for signs of a break in before entering and call the police if you think someone might have broken in or if you notice anything unusual such as an open door or window.	
Ensure you have adequate lighting around the perimeter of your home at night and consider using an automatic device or leaving some lights on if it will be dark when you get home.	
If you use a car, be alert to any visual changes to your vehicle.	
If you notice anything suspicious, contact the police and do not enter the vehicle.	