

Personal safety for councillors



LGiU

Introduction

Our personal safety is something many of us take for granted, and it is only when a major incident occurs that we stop and think about our own vulnerability. The murder of MP Jo Cox in 2016 will have caused even the most confident councillor to reflect on the way that they manage any risks associated with the role.

There have been very few major incidents involving violence toward local or national politicians, although when attacks do take place they are widely reported. There are no statistics which prove that public figures are at more risk than anybody else who is involved in carrying out a front-facing role. Some councillors may feel that the controversial decisions they are involved in making along with the current febrile political atmosphere could mean that they are more exposed.

While most of the aggression councillors experience will sit at the 'low to modest' spectrum of unacceptable behaviour, severe abuse can tip into the legal definition of violence even if no physical interaction is involved.

A strong legislative framework is useful, but the law can only ever protect retrospectively and no Act of Parliament will ever prevent bad things from happening. It is important to take time to reflect on the systems and processes that could help reduce any potential risks.

Risk and safe

There are two words which are often used in the assessment of personal safety: "risk" and "safe".

Although we instinctively know what these words mean, we will all have varying ideas of what constitutes a risk – and also what feels safe.

The emphasis in safety terms is about assessing and managing risk, with the ultimate aim of being safe. Rather than always avoiding risk, the focus is on assessing risk to work out whether it is acceptable.

Find out what already exists by way of personal safety policy or guidance. If you belong to a political party it may have a set of procedures you can follow. Your council's democratic services will also be able to provide advice and can highlight any policies around lone working and safety which relate to your role.

It might also be useful to find out more about how to carry out a risk assessment. This is a process which examines the different activities you are involved in, with a view of identifying potential hazards. This will enable you to make informed decisions relating to the level of risk you may be exposed to.

For more information, visit the government website: www.hse.gov.uk/risk/casestudies/

General principles of personal safety

There are four broad principles linked to personal safety to consider:

1. Organic risk assessment
2. Gut feel
3. Early choices
4. Routine

1. Organic risk assessment

Organic risk assessment – as opposed to formal risk assessment – focuses on assessing risk in the here and now, based on the signals we are picking up from our environment.

It is generally believed that a person who is new to a role is much better at identifying and assessing risk than somebody who has been carrying out the same activity for a period of time. In psychological terms this is described as ‘script theory’.

In practical terms this means that we become used to doing things in certain ways, and that in carrying out these scripted activities, we are less observational and aware.

If you have been in role for some time, the message is to stop and think a bit more about your environment – be alert to the danger of complacency, and be observant and intuitive.

2. Recognise and use your gut feel

No risk assessment can replace using our own senses to determine what feels safe, versus what feels wrong or ‘off’. This is often referred to as ‘gut feel’.

We all have a unique and personal set of signals which tells us that something isn’t ‘right’, and the skill is to recognise and to listen to what our body is saying. Common pieces of bio-feedback can include:

- a sense of being on high alert
- tightening in the tummy
- muscle tension
- vision and/or hearing sharpening
- goose bumps
- icy hands or feet
- nausea or acid stomach
- hairs on the back of the neck/hands/arms rising.

Unfortunately, as adults we often silence our gut feeling in an attempt to intellectualise it. In personal safety terms, gut feel is one of the most important tools we have.

Pay attention to the signals you are receiving and if you feel uncomfortable, or in danger, remove yourself from the situation as soon as you can. You can analyse the situation later and draw proper conclusions when you are in a controlled environment.

3. Early choices

Early choices are conscious decisions we make about our personal safety which can help to protect us if we have a problem. Although these can feel quite basic, early choices include:

- deciding to tell someone where you are going – and what time you are expected back
- charging your mobile phone and programming emergency numbers into the directory
- choosing to buy a personal alarm and checking the batteries before you leave home
- checking a route or a timetable before setting off
- choosing to fill up with fuel during daylight
- choosing clothing that won't restrict movement.

4. Routine

Routine is often described as the enemy of personal safety because it makes our behaviour predictable and reliable.

Whilst it isn't always possible or practical to vary patterns a huge amount, when you are able to do so, change your rhythm and routine so that you avoid:

- leaving or returning home at exactly the same time
- walking the same routes at the same times
- parking in the same spot
- similar daily routines
- holding meetings or surgeries in the same place at the same time every week or month.

Specific safety tips

These have been compiled from a variety of sources including: councillors; the police; and personal safety agencies. Some of the approaches are just plain common sense.

As a list of dos and don'ts, it looks overwhelming and, read out of context, can imply that the councillor role is more dangerous than it is. Listed in this way, it suggests that all members of the public are a risk, which is untrue: very few people will ever pose a threat.

Ward surgeries

- Choose your venue carefully and avoid holding surgeries alone in an otherwise empty building. Some councillors use busy supermarkets, libraries or shopping centres where there is good footfall. Make sure your room has good access and exits. Check for a strong and reliable mobile phone signal.
- All venues should be properly risk assessed, so seek advice from your clerk or the democratic services team on how to go about this.
- Consider having a companion with you; they can help to manage any queues and assist with some of the practical elements of the session. If you do have someone with you, make sure that you develop some coded language so that you can share information without alerting your visitor.
- Sit nearest the exit and consider how you want to lay out the rest of your seating. Chairs set out at a 45 or 90-degree angle can be more co-operative and less confrontational than sitting directly opposite someone. Sitting across a desk can provide you with a security barrier and also make it easier to take notes. You will have your own preference, although a table between parties is always safer.
- If you have a choice of seating, pick higher chairs, as these are easier and faster to get out of than armchairs.
- Keep the desk clear of items which could become used against you. If you have a hot drink, place it to the side of your chair rather than on the table in front of you.

Use of interview rooms

- Be careful about taking someone whose behaviour is uncertain or threatening into a confined space.
- Always let somebody else know you are in there.
- Sit closest to the door so that you can exit swiftly.
- Have a table between you to create a safe space.
- Make sure that the interview room is uncluttered and there is nothing on the desk or table which could become a problem.
- Be familiar with any alarm buttons or strips.
- If you can, leave the door open so others can hear what is happening.
- Ask an officer check on you, or to monitor the meeting on CCTV.
- Agree coded language so that you can communicate issues to other people.
- Make sure that you are not left alone in an interview room at the end of the working day: ask someone wait until you have finished.

Visiting people in their homes

Check your council's policy as some authorities do not recommend that councillors carry out home visits. Some Members will be more flexible about house calls to older or disabled members of the public. Before automatically agreeing to a home visit, consider whether there are alternatives.

- Can the meeting be carried out by telephone?
- Is email communication sufficient?
- Could the resident visit the council offices and meet you there?
- Could another councillor or officer attend the meeting with you?
- Is there a public place where you could meet such as a local community centre or a café?
- Could they attend your next surgery?

If the above options are not practical or possible:

- Arrange the visit during the working day (if you can).
- Check beforehand who else may be in the property and whether there are dogs on-site; if there are dogs, request that they are put in another room before you arrive.
- Make sure that someone knows exactly where you are, and has an idea of what time your meeting will finish.
- Take a companion with you.

Arriving at a resident's home

- Avoid taking a handbag or too many personal belongings into somebody's property just in case you need to make a quick exit. It is also more difficult for someone to prove an allegation of theft if you did not take a bag in with you.
- Always keep one hand free; tying up both hands will reduce your ability to move quickly and can make opening doors tricky.
- Carry out a mini assessment of the property before knocking on the door. Pay attention to the outside: dog poo in the garden is a clue that there is at least one animal at the address.
- After knocking, stand back and angle your body slightly, so you can see into the area behind them when they open the door.
- If a resident is not dressed, or is in a state of undress, do not enter the property. Say you will wait outside until they are clothed, or arrange another appointment.
- Carry out a little door step conversation before committing yourself to going in. Use all of your senses: smell (alcohol, drugs); sight (facial expression and body language); hearing (other people in the property you weren't expecting).

- If your gut tells you that something is not right, make an excuse for not going in, for example you have just been called to an emergency meeting. Promise to rearrange and then seek advice about how this should be managed.
- If you decide that it is safe to enter, note the way in and out and pay attention to the front door handle and locking mechanism.
- Should the resident attempt to lock the door once you are inside, which some people do out of habit, ask if they would be kind enough to leave it unlocked.

Managing the Meeting

- Avoid meeting in the kitchen unless your visit is to view the room. The kitchen is full of items which could be used as weapons.
- It is not good practice to have the owner and their dog in the room together with you. If the owner becomes upset this may agitate the dog and if the dog had to take sides, it probably wouldn't be yours. One way to remove a dog from the room is to apologise to the owner and say that you are allergic to both dogs and cats. This provides a genuine reason to be separated from the animal and minimises any perceived insult.
- If you sit down, try to be near the door.
- When sitting on a settee, place yourself by one of the arms so if need to leave quickly, its support makes it easier and faster for you to stand.
- Stay “above” the meeting: distance yourself from the conversation and check that it feels comfortable.
- By all means ask a buddy to make a safety call to you at a specified time, but if you do, brief them to speak quietly when they talk so that the resident cannot hear what they are saying.
- If you have arranged a checking call, agree “coded language” with your buddy which is a way to communicate an issue. Using times of day is a good way of doing this: saying “I will be back by 3.00pm” indicates that everything is alright whereas “I will be back at 5.00pm” communicates that there is a problem.
- During the discussion, if the resident’s behaviour deteriorates, or you start to feel uncomfortable, smooth things over and make an excuse to leave. Find sensible a reason, such as referring a decision to an officer. In extreme situations, you can agree to anything which enables you to get away safely. Your lie can be unpicked later when you are safe and have consulted with others on how to proceed.
- In a heated situation, even if the other party appears to calm down, you have seen a flash of their behaviour. While things are calmer, find a legitimate reason to leave.

Alarm bells

There is no scientific formula that alert us to the moment when an individual with an issue becomes an individual who is a danger. Nor is every act of violence preceded by a clear and gradual deterioration in behaviour as “stranger attacks” can and do happen.

It is impossible to create an exhaustive list of behaviours which should ring alarm bells, however below are some factors which should alert us to a potential issue, and which must be discussed with your local police.

Does the person’s behaviour frighten you?

Often it is not just one signal, but a combination of a number of features of a person’s behaviour which raises our sense of fear:

- intimidating non-verbal behaviour – including exaggerated hand and arm movements
- prolonged eye contact
- standing too close
- saying things which we find illogical or sit outside our own frame of reference
- repeating statements or sentences over again
- actual threat of harm (to us or to family – or property).

When somebody’s behaviour sits outside the ‘norm’ it is easy to be alarmed because the person’s behaviour is different to what is commonly expected. But it is very important to recognise that individuals with mental health problems are not necessarily a risk on this basis – research demonstrates that most people who commit violent acts do not have a mental health problem.

Do you think that you are being harassed or stalked?

Harassment is a broad term which is defined as a behaviour or repeated set of behaviours which ‘causes alarm or distress’. The behaviour can manifest in a number of different ways including:

- repeated attempts to impose unwanted communications – causing distress or fear in any reasonable person
- making false and malicious assertions or allegations
- targeting an individual or focussing unwanted attention on others who are connected with the individual, knowing that this will affect their victim (this is known as stalking by proxy).

In general terms examples of stalking may include:

- following a person
- watching or spying on someone
- Forcing contact with the victim through any means, including social media.

The effect of such behaviour is to curtail a victim's freedom, leaving them feeling that they constantly have to be careful. In many cases, the conduct might appear innocent (if it were to be taken in isolation), but when carried out repeatedly so as to amount to a course of conduct, it may then cause significant alarm, harassment or distress to the victim.

Has the suspect(s) ever destroyed or vandalised your property?

Some research suggests that property damage can be a pre-cursor to physical violence. But setting that aside, this can be classed as criminal damage – and must be reported to the police.

Cyber safety

Councillors may be doing a lot their campaigning and constituency work online. Many residents will expect to be informed about local issues through social media or community websites. Councillors may also be handling much of their casework via email and other online means of communication.

This can be a safer way of engaging with the public. But it is not without its own risks.

In the broadest sense there are a number of risks that we all take when we go online, such as falling for phishing scams or even identity theft. But councillors who go online in their community role can also fall victim to cyber-bullying, cyber stalking and impersonation. There are also, of course, reputational risks from engaging in disputes online either from what the other person posts or your own response in the face of provocation. And while it is rare, sometimes bad behaviour online becomes bad behaviour in real life.

Use your gut instinct

Just as we need to use our sense of danger to help us identify risks in the physical world, we need to do so online, too. If someone seems a 'too focused' on an issue or they seem a bit off, trust your instincts. If this person wants to meet up face-to-face then you should consider whether you should or if it possible to handle their complaint online. If you do decide to meet up or if there is a possibility that someone who has been difficult online will show up to a public meeting or a surgery, you should ensure that you take all of the personal safety pre-cautions that are outlined elsewhere in this guidance.

A real offense

While it is sometimes true that people who have strident online personas are fine in real life, the potential risk to your personal safety should not be underestimated. Threats of violence and encouragement of others to violence are illegal, should be taken seriously and should be reported to the police and to the hosting platform (e.g. Facebook or Twitter).

Things don't have to escalate to the level of threats of violence in order for an online interaction to be illegal or a potential risk. Online harassment follows a 'course of conduct' – which means that any individual communication may be perceived as not significant, but over a course of weeks or months builds up to a level of harassment. If the message is sufficiently offensive or threatening a single message could be described as a 'malicious communication' and both can be reported to the police as offenses.

If you have doubts about any online communication:

- Don't engage with the person any further online or through social media.
- If you must engage with the person for case work reasons only use official council channels.
- Do ask for support and advice from members' services.
- Do report inappropriate communications to the hosting platform.
- If you feel that communications may be harassing or threatening, do save and screen shot messages and report to your local police.

In general:

- Be careful about sharing your physical location online. When you do have to, such when attending public events or councillor surgeries make sure you follow other precautions listed.
- Follow the cyber-security instructions your council's IT department have shared for local authority (.gov.uk) accounts and devices.
- For personal accounts and devices, ensure you use secure passwords, pin codes on devices and take advantage of all the privacy and security features within platforms such as Facebook.

Mobile technology

Mobile phones can make us more vulnerable. They can be a magnet for thieves or a distraction at a time when we should be monitoring and evaluating our environment.

A mobile phone can be used to communicate a problem but in extreme situations it would not be possible to reach for a telephone – let alone dial a number.

Mobile technology and tracing

If you want people to know where you are a number of apps have been developed which enable people to be traced through their mobile phones.

Apple and Android stores have a number of free downloadable apps which can be used to trace somebody through the location of the person's telephone.

The basic principle of these apps is that you invite people to be part of your 'circle' and once linked, you can tap on a person's photograph to locate where they are. This is often accurate to a few yards.

In personal safety terms the emphasis is on being traceable and not on being trackable. These types of apps are open to huge abuse but being traceable might be a reassuring tool for some people. Users have to remember to turn their 'location' service off in the phone's settings if they do not want to be tracked at all times.

Incident reporting

One of the problems that organisations experience is the lack of intelligence and information about individuals or groups whose behaviour is causing concern. There appears to be a tremendous reluctance to share information between individuals and organisations.

If you are involved in an incident, or have concerns around an individual's behaviour, it is important to report this to your Party and/or to the Democratic Services team. Some councils have incident reporting forms which are designed specifically for this purpose, and it would be a useful idea to find out what the procedure is within your authority.

Although there can be a hesitation around reporting an individual, your council does need to know that there is an issue as officers or other agencies will need to be made aware.

An incident report must be completed as soon as possible after an event, whilst memories are fresh and so that incident can be investigated and appropriate action taken. Action might also include offering support to people who have been involved and you can assess whether you need help. Your political party or the council will be able to provide you with advice and guidance if this is needed.

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This publication is abridged from *Personal Safety for Councillors* booklet which was written and published by Miranda Smythe from The Baikie-Wood Consultancy Ltd. The full publication includes information on: risk assessment; additional personal safety tips; use of mobile phones and technology; assessing who may be a risk; harassment and stalking; trolling and cyberbullying; physical threat and retaliation; incident reporting.

To order copies of the full publication go to <http://baikiewood.co.uk/personal-safety-for-councillors/>



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