



**A Councillor's
Guide to
Personal Safety**

Contents

1.0	INTRODUCTION	3
2.0	WARD SURGERIES	3
3.0	ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS	4
4.0	DEALING WITH EMOTIONAL CONSTITUENTS.....	4
5.0	HOME VISITS	5
6.0	PERSONAL CALLERS.....	5
7.0	MALICIOUS AND NUISANCE TELEPHONE CALLS.....	6
8.0	MAIL AND E-MAIL.....	6
9.0	CAR SAFETY AND PARKING.....	7
10.0	PERSONAL SAFETY	7
11.0	REPORTING INCIDENTS	8
12.0	TRAINING.....	8

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 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 and treating with respect and sympathy angry and frustrated residents who often resort to their elected representative when they feel that they are getting nowhere in resolving their problems through other channels.
- 1.2 Circumstances will vary and councillors will make their own decisions about how to conduct their duties as councillors while remaining easily accessible to their residents. Councillors should undertake their own individual risk assessments in carrying out their various duties.
- 1.3 The purpose of this guide is to set out what personal safety measures can be taken by councillors to prevent and to 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.

2.0 WARD SURGERIES

- 2.1 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 meet every aspect of good safety practice and are also accessible to their constituents. What follows are suggestions about how to make a surgery safe and effective – some apply wherever the surgery is held while others are good practice to be followed if the opportunity arises. Most councillors will go through their entire service on the council without experiencing any problems and a little time given to preparation and planning can reduce the already small risk further.
- 2.2 The Basics:
 - If possible, 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 makes it much easier to manage a busy surgery. If you are currently doing surgeries alone, arrange to discuss how this can be overcome with fellow ward councillors, council officers or members of your local party.
 - 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 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 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.

2.3 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, for example, 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.
- 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 a call 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.

3.0 ATTENDANCE AT MEETINGS

3.1 Councillors will often have to attend evening meetings, which may finish after dark and are advised, if possible, to park their cars as close as possible to the Civic Centre or Bognor Regis Town Hall, in a well-lit area.

3.2 If meetings finish after dark or if members of the public/appellants have been angry or upset at a meeting for whatever reason, councillors should consider the need for them to be accompanied to their cars by other councillors or council officers who have attended the meeting.

4.0 DEALING WITH EMOTIONAL CONSTITUENTS

4.1 It is inevitable that some of the people you will meet will be angry or upset – if everything in the garden was rosy, they probably wouldn't be coming to see you! You need to be prepared to handle all types of emotion. For example, it is worth having some tissues on hand for the person for whom it is just too much and bursts into tears.

- 4.2 Councillors have developed the quiet skill of being concerned about constituents' problems without being so involved that they become too emotional to be of help. Calmness is the fact of whatever comes up will help you and your constituents.
- 4.3 You may find that racist or other offensive remarks are made. If they are directed at you – do not respond – this will only make a situation worse. Instead bring the interview to an end as quickly as possible. If they are more general remarks, you should indicate 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 and **if you are alone and in a vulnerable situation do not put yourself at risk** no matter how angry the remarks make you.
- 4.4 Training is available to help those who have to deal with aggressive and difficult people. Further information can be obtained from Human Resources. A wide range of advice is included in such training for example dressing sensibly – not wearing anything around your neck, for example, that a person could get hold of.

5.0 HOME VISITS

- 5.1 Councillors do sometimes visit residents in their homes especially those who are elderly or disabled or where they simply want to see for themselves conditions that are the subject of complaints.
- 5.2 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. 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.
- 5.3 If considered necessary, councillors can contact the Group Head of Law & Governance on 01903 737607 or the Corporate Health & Safety team via email health.safety@arun.gov.uk as they have access to the council's 'Customers of Concern' database.

6.0 PERSONAL CALLERS

- 6.1 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 ward surgeries reduces the chances of unwanted callers.

7.0 MALICIOUS AND NUISANCE TELEPHONE CALLS

7.1 Councillors occasionally get the odd nuisance or abusive call. Although infrequently, they can become the target of a persistent, anonymous caller who may have a grudge against the council. These calls need to be dealt with in accordance with police advice as follows:

- Keep calm. Try not to sound anxious or distressed. Sadly, most malicious callers enjoy causing distress to their victims – if this opportunity is denied them, they are less likely to continue.
- Do not enter into a conversation with the client or respond emotionally.
- If they are silent, do not try to persuade them to speak.
- Take control. If the phone rings again, wait for the caller to identify themselves before you speak. Genuine persons will speak first. If it is a malicious caller, put the handset down calmly and ignore it for 10 minutes before replacing the handset. This will frustrate the malicious caller and should decrease the possibility of randomly being targeted again as each call they make which does not get through will increase their phone bill.
- Keep pen and paper near the phone to allow you to record details.
- Note any clues the caller may provide as to sex, age, accent, etc.
- Listen to any clues which may reveal the motive and intention of the caller.
- Immediately write down the details including times and dates when calls were made to assist police at a later stage recording.
- Listen for background noise which may provide valuable information for example railway sounds, industrial noises, machinery, music, animals.
- Dial 1471 after the call to obtain the caller's telephone number. If necessary, callers can still be traced even if they have used the '141 number withheld' facility. Ask your phone service provider for details.
- Inform the Police on 101/999.
- Inform the Group Head of Law & Governance on 01903 737607.

8.0 MAIL AND E-MAIL

8.0 As with telephone calls, councillors on rare occasions can become the target of malicious mail or e-mail. Materials of various types might be sent.

8.1 E-mails

- Do not delete these – they may be material evidence.
- Save them onto your computer or produce them as hard copies if necessary.
- Make a record listing what you receive and when.
- Contact the Police on 101 / 999 to obtain advice on the most appropriate action.

8.2 Faxes and Malicious Material

- Do not throw away malicious material. Keep it (and the envelope it arrived in) in a secure place and handle them as little as possible.
- If the handwriting on the package or envelope appears to belong to a repeat sender of malicious or nuisance material, do not open it.
- Keep any malicious faxes you are sent.
- Keep a record of all malicious material which is sent to you.
- Call the Police (telephone 101/ 999) for advice on what to do next.

8.3 Malicious Text Messages

- Do not delete them.
- If the messages are persistent and you report them, you may be asked to attend a police station so that the messages can be witnessed and recorded in a statement.

8.4 Councillors may receive repeated letters from a constituent who has a particular 'axe to grind' and who will never be satisfied that a complaint has been dealt with satisfactorily even though all proper channels of the Council's Complaints Procedure have been exhausted. In these circumstances, councillors should seek guidance from the Group Head of Law & Governance (Monitoring Officer) in respect of the council's procedures for dealing with vexatious complainants.

9.0 CAR SAFETY AND PARKING

9.1 You need to take the same precautions as most car owners do:

- consider whether an area will be dark and isolated when you return to your car.
- park, where possible, under street lighting.
- where possible arrange to park so that you can exit in forward gear.
- lock car doors as soon as getting into the car.
- take boxes/bags to the car when other people are around.

10.0 PERSONAL SAFETY

10.1 If councillors feel nervous about their safety when carrying out their duties, lone working devices may offer some reassurance. Advice on the purchase of such

devices can be obtained from the Corporate Health and Safety team via email health.safety@arun.gov.uk.

11.0 REPORTING INCIDENTS

- 11.1 Any incidents/accidents, even if fairly minor, or any 'nearly happened' or 'near miss' incidents should be reported to the council's Corporate Health and Safety team to enable the appropriate records to be maintained. This enables the council to monitor incidents and decide if any action needs to be taken to prevent a similar incident reoccurring. You may also consider it advisable to warn ward colleagues and, depending on the nature of the incident, you may wish to report it to the Police.
- 11.2 To report an incident, please contact the Group Head of Law & Governance (Monitoring Officer) who will complete the reporting form on your behalf.
- 11.3 Contact details are as follows:-

Corporate Health & Safety	health.safety@arun.gov.uk
Group Head of Law & Governance	01903 737607 or monitoring.officer@arun.gov.uk
Sussex Police	101 / 999

12.0 TRAINING

- 12.1 Councils have shared responsibilities for the safety of councillors whilst on council business as they do for their officers.
- 12.2 Training for councillors can be made available through the Corporate Health & Safety team. Please contact the Group Head of Law & Governance (Monitoring Officer) on 01903 737607 or via monitoring.officer@arun.gov.uk.

Ends....