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Practical advice for handling physical abuse and personal security

This section sets out the practical advice for dealing with physical abuse and improving personal safety.



This section presents practical principles that councillors can follow to enhance their personal and home security and minimise the risk of physical abuse. The principles can be applied to various settings such as surgeries, home visits, while traveling and council meetings and we have provided example throughout the Guide.

Definition and legal position

Physical abuse encompasses a wide range of bodily harms including, but not limited to, pushing, slapping, kicking, brandishing weapons, kidnapping, sexual assault, rape and murder in extreme occasions. Physical abuse is the most easily recognised form of violence, but it is also the rarest form of abuse experienced by councillors. Most councillors will not experience any physical abuse but preparing and planning can reduce the risk even further. In this Guide, verbal abuse is

dealt with under psychological abuse, although verbal abuse can include threats which represent a personal safety concern, or a crime and councillors should be aware that verbal abuse can escalate to physical abuse.

Many of the behaviours and conduct captured under the broad term 'physical abuse' are criminal offences (relevant criminal offences are listed in full within the legal chapter of this Guide). Any physical contact without consent and/or lawful excuse is likely to be an offence of common assault in England and Wales (Criminal Justice Act 1988) and, where this causes injury, will be captured by Actual Bodily Harm or Grievous Bodily Harm offences (Offences Against the Person Act 1861). Similarly, physical contact which is sexual in nature is likely to be a sexual offence (Sexual Offences Act 2003).

Preventative measures and personal safety

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.

Below we'll go through some principles and examples of how you can do this in practice.

Be proactive: home security and technology

There are multiple actions that can help councillors be and feel safer both personally and in their homes. By following the SHIELD principles described above councillors can mitigate against the risk of physical abuse.

Take the below case study as an example:

A councillor has been the victim of a campaign of abuse by a resident who is unhappy about the planning decision that they were involved with. Recently, the resident approached the councillor in the street and mentioned that he knows where they live and made threats against the councillor. The councillor reported the incident to the police, who flagged the councillor's

home address and recommended some extra precautions be taken while the police investigate the incident.

In the example above, a suggested next step for the councillor would be review their home and personal safety arrangements and as part of this, set clear boundaries between their public and private life where possible. Council officers or local police may be able to support councillors to complete home risk assessments.

Councillors may wish to review their home security regularly, for example basic actions like ensuring fences and walls are in a good state of repair and that entrance and exit routes are well lit can reduce safety risks. Councillors might also consider installing CCTV cameras, smart doorbells or better external lighting at home. Expert installers affiliated with the **National Security Inspectorate (<https://www.nsi.org.uk/>)** (NSI) or the **Security Systems and Alarms Inspection Board (<https://ssaib.org/>)** (SSAIB) can advise on what mitigations might be most useful and the council or local police force may also be able to support councillor in reviewing their home security.

Funding available for councillor's home security varies across different councils and different nations. The **Independent Remuneration Panel (<https://gov.wales/independent-remuneration-panel-wales-annual-report-2022-2023.html>)** for Wales has clarified that councils should provide funding for appropriate security measures to protect councillors from personal risk or significant threat. However, in Northern Ireland these items are not eligible expenses. In England, the provision varies and the LGA continues to promote good practice around support councillors with their safety and security, including new **Councillor Safety case studies** published in April 2022. We would encourage you to speak with your council and local police team on funding for appropriate security measures.

Programming emergency numbers into mobile phones can be helpful if used appropriately. Having a trusted colleague or family member on speed dial can help in non-emergency situations and non-emergency

incidents can be reported to the police online and by calling 101. 999 is for emergency situations. Where you cannot call, the service is poor, or if you cannot speak, you can also text 999 for assistance, although the response may be slower by text. It's advisable to register your mobile for the 999 text service ahead of time, by texting Register to 999.

It is also useful to get familiar with emergency features that some wearable devices, such as smart watches, offer. They can be pre-programmed with emergency numbers to make it easier to contact the police, a family member or a trusted friend.

Use personal alarms, phone trackers and other technological devices to let people know your location in case of emergency. There are numerous apps that allow trusted members of a group to share their geolocation. You can share your location using Google maps, however, there are a range of specific apps designed to help you share your location with colleagues or family members. Common examples include **Life 360** (<https://www.life360.com/intl/>), **HollieGuard** (<https://hollieguard.com/>), **PeopleSafe technologies** (https://peoplesafe.co.uk/?utm_source=Google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=CB_Brand-Peoplesafe&utm_term=peoplesafe&gclid=EAlalQobChMI7sn33Z_99gIVEO3tCh3rWgPsEAAYASAAEgLk-fD_BwE); your council may also have a bespoke personal alarm system or a preferred App for councillors to use.

Set boundaries between your private and public life. Councillors are advised not to meet residents in their own home. If a resident comes to your house, you do not have to open the door. You can discuss their issue outside and suggest they book a time to see you somewhere more appropriate. If you agree to see a resident in your home, ensure another person is there to support you.

Take advantage of training and support offers. Look out for council safety training workshops and participate when they are offered. New and experienced councillors are advised to attend regular safety training if it is available.

Be aware: public interactions and ward surgeries

Councillors often have to make difficult decisions in public meetings and come into contact with residents regularly in the community and at ward surgeries. Openness and transparency are important parts of democracy, but it can also make councillors vulnerable to abuse. This is why it is important to embed safety in the design of activities and when planning public duties and interactions with residents. Take the below case study as an example:

A council meeting is due to be held next week where the closure of public library is due to be discussed. This has been a controversial issue for a long time as the public library is a place where residents meet, socialise and learn. Its closing is expected to impact the elderly the most. It is expected that a lot of very upset residents will attend the meeting. A councillor who is going to the meeting suspects that the discussion will get heated and that this will spill out into conversations with residents in the community and at their ward surgery.

The above case study illustrates the difficulties many councillors face when communicating difficult decisions to residents. If councillors feel safe to engage with residents that are upset, it is advised to use calming techniques, for example by letting residents have their say and actively listening to their concerns. However, it is important to remember if you feel threatened or unsafe, you can bring the interaction to a close.

Some suggested ways of practicing being safety aware councillors may take include:

Ensuring that meetings are held in suitable locations and environments such as council premises during opening times, when there are other people in the building. It is advisable to declutter and clear the room from heavy objects that can be used as weapons. Consider the layout of the room, ensure you can stand and exit easily, this may mean sitting

closest to the door to facilitate a swift exit if needs be, it is also advisable to use a desk to provide a natural barrier between you and the resident.

Keep a record of the interaction, including the names of the attendees. Some councillors indicate that asking attendees to pre-register has improved feelings of safety. Pre-registration gives councillors an indication of how many people will show up at the meeting and other potential issues that may arise, giving them time to prepare and adapt their personal safety strategy.

Keep an incident log and record and report any type of unacceptable behaviour. Any incident recorded should be dated, timed and signed in case future action is required. It is also good to share this with fellow councillors and the council so they can be aware of potential issues and if necessary, adapt their own personal safety strategy.

Travel safe

Councillors are highly visible members of their local communities, this can make them vulnerable not just when they are acting in their capacity as a councillor, but also in their everyday life and in particular when travelling to and from council or ward events. Embedding safety into journeys and travel planning is an important personal safety consideration.

Councillors regularly have to travel to council meetings, sometimes in the evening. The case study below provides an example of how a councillor might risk assess their travel plans in these circumstances.

A councillor has an evening council meeting in a building they have never been to before. The councillor doesn't drive and uses a route planner app to look at different options and decide whether to cycle to the meeting or take the bus. The councillor looks at the bus stop where they would need to wait at on a map and remembers it isn't very well lit and that the service is irregular past 8 o'clock in the evening. The councillor is very familiar with the bike route and lock-up facilities and decides to

cycle instead. They also have a colleague who usually cycles to the meetings as well and contact them to coordinate their arrival times so they can walk to and from the building together.

Before leaving home by public transport, bike or car, it is advisable to:

Be unpredictable and avoid routine

Having the same routine, for example when and how you travel can make it easier for people to know where you will be and when. Instead try to vary the times of your travel and your routes, particularly when on foot.

Check the route to the destination and back

Doing this ahead of time can also help avoid any risky situations, getting lost or missing the last train/bus home. Pre-book taxis or minicabs if required.

Keep hands and mind free

Mobile phones are a great tool to have if the need for help arises, but they also are a distraction. Keep your phone in easy reach, in a pocket rather than a bag, and pay attention to your surroundings while travelling.

Instinct is a good guide

Think twice before offering a lift to unknown people, avoid empty streets if travelling on foot, and don't sit in empty train carriages and upstairs in empty buses.

Plan ahead

Park your car or bicycle in well-lit and accessible location, where it is also easy to leave; ensure you have some emergency cash and other forms of payment in case you have to change your plans.

Make sure someone knows where you are

While on council business in the community or at the council make sure someone knows where you are expected to be, when you are expected to return and how you will be travelling. This is sometimes called the 'Buddy system' and your buddy could be a friend, family member, a fellow councillor or council officer. For example, when walking home from a council meeting in the evening you should let them know that the meeting has finished, you are on your way and what time you expect to arrive home. If you don't live with your buddy, let them know when you've arrived safely home.

Think smart about home visits

It is preferable not to arrange meetings with residents in their homes. Often utilising public spaces, having conversations over the phone or using virtual meeting, are options that can be just as effective. However, for various reasons, sometimes councillors may decide to visit a resident in their home. Take the example below:

A private renting resident has some issues with the way their landlord is dealing with some issues inside the property and asks their councillor to meet with them at their home. The councillor agrees that a home visit is appropriate to view the state of the property, however, the resident shows signs of being very angry towards the council in a preliminary phone call and the councillor is concerned about attending the property.

In this case, councillors can:

- Check for references about the home and the resident. Councillors can ask fellow councillors if they've encountered the resident before and ask council officers to check their violent persons/cautionary contracts register to see if the resident or address is listed. If there are serious

concerns, the council may be able to check if the local police have flagged the resident or address due to violent or abusive behaviour and whether the police consider it advisable to visit the resident.

- Don't go alone. See if you can be accompanied by a fellow councillor or if a relevant officer might attend with you, for example from the relevant service the resident is interested in. It is always advisable for councillors to do home visits in pairs and avoid lone working.
- Call the resident to confirm the meeting and assess their mood beforehand. It is also worth asking the resident if there is a cat, dog or other pets within the house and if so, ask the resident to keep them in a separate room.
- Carry out a mini risk assessment before entering their home. On arrival look for evidence of dogs, people you weren't expecting, the general state of the house and possible exit routes. Avoid entering the property immediately after the door is opened but take a moment to assess the situation. Don't allow the resident to lock you in with them. Sit near the door and have a clear exit route. Take some time to think and feel if everything is alright and assess the physical and mental state of the resident.
- Share information about your whereabouts and plan by letting other people know about the time and expected duration of the visit. Ensure that your mobile phone is working, that it has battery at all times and update the emergency numbers.

Protecting your information

It is important for councillors to keep in touch with residents and communities and be accessible to both. Most engagements with residents are rewarding and non-adversarial. However, sometimes councillors will be contacted by angry or frustrated residents, as in the example below, and it is important to set clear boundaries between councillors private and public lives.

A councillor holds regular surgeries in the public library. They take place every week at the same time and in the same location. Normally, the surgeries are very rewarding as they facilitate face to face interactions with residents and an opportunity to discuss with them directly their problems or concerns. However, the councillor notices that the same person is showing up every week to angrily discuss things that are not related to the council. Later, the resident started waiting for the councillor to finish the surgery.

In this case, it is advisable to consider:

- Avoiding holding surgeries alone and be careful what information you share publicly. It isn't always preferable to advertise surgery locations and times on public websites. Instead, councillors can operate appointment only ward surgeries or only give out information about when and where the surgery is to people who get in contact to request this information.
- A good council website is key in facilitating official communications by offering clear information on councillor's official contact details and working

hours, but councillors should be careful about what information is in the public domain.

Keep home addresses private

Candidates standing in local elections now have the option to keep their home address private and only declare the area they reside in. After elections councillors are required to declare all pecuniary interests within 28 days of being elected but you can apply for a dispensation from your Monitoring Officer to keep your address private on the public register.

Other general principles for personal safety

Use your network of family, colleagues and friends

Establish a safety network with people you trust so they can help you if you need it. Personal and professional networks not only make work more fun and are key for the implementation of a successful personal safety strategy. Safety networks can be involved by:

- Informing trusted colleagues, family and friends of your planned activities, the place and time of surgeries, whereabouts or any home visits planned.
- Asking someone to accompany you to different activities.
- Establishing with them a safety word to ask for assistance, if needed.
- Sharing experiences. Councillors have indicated that they feel safer and reassured when they share their experiences with others.

Keep a record

This is not only for police matters but can apply to ongoing minor acts of aggression or abuse. Keeping a record can also be used to warn other colleagues of potential red flags and to help the council identify patterns of behaviour that require a coordinated response by the council.

Keep calm

Some residents can be angry or upset and look to councillors to fix issues that may be beyond their control. Keep calm and try not to engage in heated exchanges. You are within your rights to postpone or close a meeting or visit if you feel abused or threatened. Tell the person you will speak to them when they are calmer and try to re-schedule the appointment.

Contact the police if you feel unsafe

Remember that people's thresholds to deal with unacceptable behaviour are different and people experience things differently. You are a representative of your local community but are under no obligation to put yourself into unsafe situations. If you are subjected to offensive, threatening, intimidating, racist, homophobic, sexist or derogatory remarks, you are within your rights to bring the meeting to an end and seek assistance. It is recommended that you take a detailed note of the incident and person(s) involved and let your council know about the incident. You can decide if you want to inform the police.

Councillors may find the **Further resources** (<https://www.local.gov.uk/further-resources>) section of this Guide helpful for more detailed personal safety guidance and supportive documents.

Councillors' guide to handling harassment, abuse and intimidation

[\(/councillors-guide-handling-harassment-abuse-and-intimidation\)](#)

Definition of harassment, abuse and intimidation

[\(/definition-harassment-abuse-and-intimidation\)](#)

General advice on handling abuse and intimidation

[\(/general-advice-handling-abuse-and-intimidation\)](#)

Practical advice for handling online abuse

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Practical advice for handling physical abuse and personal security

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Practical advice for handling psychological abuse and impact on wellbeing

[\(/practical-advice-handling-psychological-abuse-and-impact-wellbeing\)](#)

What legal support is there?

[\(/what-legal-support-there\)](#)

Advice for supporting councillors

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Basics on communicating with residents, colleagues and officers

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Further resources

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