



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 recent murder of MP Jo Cox will have caused even the most confident amongst us to take a step back to reflect on the way that we manage any risks associated with our 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, although some councillors may feel that the controversial decisions they are involved in making could mean that they are more exposed.

Every councillor I meet has their own story to relate about an unpleasant or challenging interaction with a member of the public, and verbal or written abuse is often accepted as being part and parcel of the role. Whilst most of the aggression councillors experience will usually 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.

In the year ending 2015, the Office of National Statistics reports an increase of 27 per cent on the previous year for "violence against the person" offences. On a cautionary note, and just to place this in context, the guidance notes to the report say that in reality there is no statistical change compared with the previous year and that the 'increase' is explained by improvements in the recording of crime. Some of the apparent increase will have also been influenced by the broadening of legislation such as the Protection from Harassment Act and the Crime and Disorder Act.

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. This is why we should all take time out of our busy schedules to reflect on the systems and processes we should have in place to help keep us safe, and to reduce any risks we may be exposed to in our councillor role.

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. After all, if we avoided taking any risks, we would never get out of bed (except for the danger of pressure sores).

If you want a starting point for developing a personal safety plan, you should carry out some investigation to find out what already exists by way of policy or guidance. For example, if you belong to a political party they may have a set of procedures you can follow. In addition, your authority'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.

You might also find it 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, with the idea of reducing or eliminating risks.

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

General principles of personal safety

Later on we will explore specific situations and talk about what can keep us safe in each of these scenarios. Before we do this, there are four broad principles to consider linked to personal safety:

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

1. Organic risk assessment

Earlier on in this article, formal risk assessment was mentioned. Organic risk assessment is more focused 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 into a role is much better at identifying and assessing risk than somebody else 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. Routines are established and stuck to – which can mean that there is a tendency to stick to the same pattern – even when a situation demands a different approach.

So for those of us who have been in role for some time, the message is to stop and think a bit more about our environment – to be alert to the danger of complacency, and to be observational 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'.

This sixth sense is hard-wired into us and is a mechanism that is designed to help us to recognise a perceived danger. Our brain is good at learning and storing information – and when we are in a situation which has threatened our ability to cope in the past, our brain will warn us to be alert.

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:

- 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.

Although our brain can be mistaken about what constitutes a threat, do 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 a friend or a relative where you are going – and what time you are expected back
- charging your mobile telephone 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 appropriate clothing.

Over the years I have been involved in de-briefing people who have been involved in events where their personal safety has been compromised, and I would estimate that most, if not all, have expressed regrets about early choices they could have made – and didn't.

4. Routine

Routine is often described as the enemy of personal safety because it makes our behaviour predictable and reliable. Whilst reliability is often a prized characteristic, in safety terms it can make us vulnerable – particularly when a habitual activity is known to others.

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

A number of safety tips follow which relate to the different activities councillors are involved in as part of their role.

These have been compiled from a variety of sources including guidance from councillors which have shared during training sessions; from the police – and from personal safety agencies. Some of the approaches are just plain common sense.

As a list of do's and don'ts, it looks overwhelming and, read out of context, can imply that our 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.

Visiting people in their homes

Councillors will sometimes pay home visits to residents. Sometimes this is because of a mobility or disability issue which means that it is impractical to meet elsewhere.

Before you automatically agree to a home visit, consider whether there are alternatives:

- can the meeting be carried out by telephone – or even by email?
- can a ward colleague or member of council staff attend the meeting with you?
- could you meet in a public place – eg. a community centre or even a local café?

In an instance where the above options are not practical or possible:

- arrange the visit during normal working hours (if you can)
- when you arrange the visit ask who else may be in the property
- check whether there are any dogs – and if so, whether they can be put in another room before you arrive
- request that the resident does not smoke whilst you are there
- make sure that a responsible person knows exactly where you are, and has an idea of what time you are expected to leave.

On arrival

- If you have driven, leave any personal possessions in the car – avoid taking a handbag into somebody's property just in case you need to make a quick exit. This also means that you can keep one hand free.
- Carry out a mini 'risk assessment' on the property before approaching. Notice the environment – for example dog poo in the garden will tell you that there is at least one animal at the address.
- After knocking at the door, stand back and to the side. When the resident answers the door, rather than just going straight in, carry out a little door step conversation. Use your senses: smell, sight, hearing, gut-feel – and if anything feels 'off' make an excuse for not going in.
- Should a resident not be dressed, or in a state of undress, do not enter the property. Say you will wait outside until they are clothed, or arrange another appointment.
- If you decide that it is safe to enter, note the way in and out, type of catch/lock on the door and how to operate it should the need arise.
- Should the resident attempt to lock the door once you are inside (some older people have been advised to always lock their doors from the inside), ask if they would be kind enough to leave it unlocked as you have some files in the car that you may need to get in a moment.

The meeting

- Try never to meet in the kitchen unless your visit is to look at the room! The kitchen provides many possibilities when it comes to dangerous weapons that are best avoided.
- It is not good practice to have the owner and their dog in the room together with you. In some breeds the sound of their owner becoming upset will upset the dog and if a dog took 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 have asthma and are allergic to both dogs and cats. This minimises any perceived insult.
- Where possible, if you sit down, try to be near the door and if you have to sit in an armchair or settee, place yourself by the arm to make it easier and faster for you to stand up.
- During the discussion, if the resident's behaviour deteriorates, make an excuse and leave. In extreme situations you can agree to anything if it will keep you safe, and will allow you to exit. This can be unpicked later.
- Stay 'above' the meeting. Occasionally just distance yourself from the conversation and check that things are not getting out of hand.
- Find reasons for leaving such as referring a decision to an officer or manager.
- Even if somebody appears to calm down – if you have seen a flash of behaviour that made you anxious, then it is time to go whilst things are calmer.

Callers to your own home

Whilst some councillors are happy to see people in their own home, others will avoid this, unless the person concerned is well known to them. In general terms residents are normally advised to contact councillors by telephone or email, or through formal surgeries, and some councils actively issue guidance warning against home visits.

General advice is that unexpected doorstep callers should not be invited into a property unless known and trusted, and that residents should be encouraged to make formal appointments.

If you decide that you will be open to home visits, as a very first step you should talk to Democratic Services about whether you can have access to the council's 'potentially violent person's register' so that any visitors can be checked beforehand. You should also review your home security which should include carrying out a formal risk assessment.

Ward surgeries

Choose your venue wisely and avoid holding ward surgeries alone in an otherwise empty building. Select a building where you have a good and reliable mobile telephone signal – and ideally where there is good access.

All venues should be formally risk assessed. Talk to your party or to Democratic Services for advice and guidance on how to approach this.

Think about how you lay out the environment: chairs at 45 degrees can be more co-operative and less confrontational than sitting directly opposite, and higher chairs are easier to stand up from than lower arm chairs. If you have a hot drink, keep this by the side of your chair rather than on the table in front of you.

If you have a companion with you, make sure that you develop some 'coded language' which is a way of communicating with each other without alerting the resident. This means that in a difficult situation you can communicate that you have a problem – without aggravating the situation further.

Use of interview rooms

- Take care about taking somebody whose behaviour is uncertain or threatening into a confined space.
- Always let somebody know before you work 1:1 in a separate area.
- Make sure that the interview room is uncluttered.
- Sit closest to the door so that you can exit swiftly and if it is appropriate, leave the door open
- Ask an officer to walk past and check on you, or to monitor the meeting on CCTV.
- Develop a bit of 'coded language' so that you can communicate issues to colleagues discreetly.
- Never leave a colleague alone in an interview room; somebody should always stay until the visitor has left.

Travelling

Travelling by car

- Make sure that you have enough fuel – it often feels more secure to re-fill a tank during the day than after dark.
- Regularly check your tyres (including the spare).
- Consider joining a motoring organisation (some give preferential treatment to female motorists).
- Check your route, and avoid areas that you feel uncomfortable driving through alone.
- Avoid placing your handbag or valuables on the passenger seat beside you.
- Lock your door when driving around towns and in remote areas. In an accident, if your airbag inflates then your doors will automatically unlock.
- If someone you do not know taps on the car window and asks for directions, avoid winding your window down.
- Avoid giving lifts to people that you do not know very well – trust your instincts.
- If you must give a lift to somebody you do not know well, the safest place for a driver to place a passenger is in the rear, diagonally opposite to the driving seat.
- Park your car in a place that you know will be safe to return to.
- Reverse into parking spaces so that you are free to pull out easily.
- If you are parking in a cul-de-sac, turn the car around so that you are facing out of the cul-de-sac.
- Avoid having identifying stickers in your car. In some instances, this may make your car a target for vandalism.
- In multi-storey car parks, try to use the ground floor away from stairs and lifts. Have the correct change ready for the machine.
- Have your car keys in your hand so you can get straight into the vehicle.
- Look inside before entering your vehicle to ensure that the car is as you left it.
- If you have a choice, avoid parking with your driver door next to vans with sliding doors.
- Take care about programming your home address too specifically into your satnav – particularly if this will be kept in the same bag as your home keys.
- If you are followed in your vehicle, do not get out. Drive to a busy area, ensure that all doors are locked and flash your lights and sound the horn to attract attention.

Public transport and taxis

- When using public transport, have the right change or your pass available so that you do not have to bring out your purse or wallet.
- Ensure that you know travel times – particularly the details of the last bus/train of the day.
- Wait for a bus or train in a well-lit place near other people whenever possible and pay attention to your environment rather than playing on a mobile phone.
- Carry 'emergency' money so that if a bus or train does not turn up, you are able to call a taxi.
- If a bus is empty, or it is after dark, it may be safer to stay on the lower deck and sit near the driver.
- On trains, choose carriages that are well-populated and do not hesitate to move seats if you feel uncomfortable where you are.
- On trains, if you sit next to the door make sure that you keep your mobile telephone close to you. A common crime is for a thief to grab a telephone and make a dash just as doors are closing.
- Avoid compartments which have no access to corridors or other parts of the train.
- Sit with other people and avoid empty carriages.
- If you think that somebody is following you, enlist help from some of the other passengers or, if on a bus, from the driver.
- If you feel threatened, make as much noise as possible to attract the attention of the driver or guard.
- If you can, and if travelling at night or in an unfamiliar area, try to arrange for someone to meet you at the bus stop or train station. If this is not possible, try to walk near other people with whom you feel safe, and walk purposefully to your destination.
- Always carry the telephone number of a trusted, licensed company with you.
- Taxis (Hackney Carriages) can be hailed in the street. They look like purpose-built taxis or black cabs and have an illuminated taxi sign on the roof.
- Licensed minicabs cannot be hailed in the street. They must be pre-booked. The driver should have ID and the vehicle will have a photographic license. Check that the photograph matches the driver. If it doesn't, don't get in the cab.
- When booking a taxi or minicab, ask for the driver's name, as well as the make and colour of the car. Confirm the driver's details when they arrive – is it the taxi or minicab you ordered?
- Sharing a taxi or minicab with a friend and sitting in the back of the car are good safety strategies.

- If you chat to the driver, be careful not to give out any personal details.
- Minicabs that pick up fares on the street, without being pre-booked, are illegal, uninsured and potentially very dangerous.

Cycling safety

- Keep your bike in good working order. Repairs are best done at home rather than by the road.
- Dress to be seen and safe. Wear a fluorescent belt or jacket and always use lights.
- Consider wearing a cycling helmet.
- Obey the rules of the road.
- Avoid listening to music or talking/texting whilst cycling.
- Secure your bicycle with a good quality chain and padlock.

Walking

- Check that you know where you are going – and if you have to ask for directions avoid looking lost and helpless. Research suggests that people are less likely to be a victim of crime if they look confident and assured.
- Remember that routes that seem very safe during the day look completely different after dark – have the vision to imagine what your walk will be like at night. Be prepared to walk a longer way around to keep safe.
- Avoid making eye contact with people with whom do not want to engage in conversation.
- Wear comfortable shoes that you can move quickly in, if you need to.
- Awareness alarms are sometimes used – if you have one, make sure that it is accessible.
- If you are wearing a scarf, or have long hair, tuck it inside your coat.
- Sling your handbag across your shoulder – or preferably –under your coat
- Be prepared to give your wallet and your bag up, if needed. Wallets can be placed in an inside pocket that is secured with a safety pin (very useful for avoiding pick-pockets).
- Try to keep both hands free as you walk.
- Avoid talking on your telephone – this advertises that you have something expensive which can be stolen and also distracts you from your environment. If you do need to text or talk, find a busy place to stop and stand with your back to something solid.
- Keep enough money on you to be able to use alternative transport such as a taxi, if you need to.
- If you think that you are being followed, head for lights and noise and busy areas rather

than walking into the middle of nowhere (even if it takes you off your route). Find a commercial premises or public building where you can find somebody whom you trust.

- Take care of distraction crimes – eg. somebody asking you for the time.

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 shown 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?

You are the best assessor of risk and if a person’s behaviour frightens you, then doing nothing is not an option.

Whilst we can individually recognise fear, in some instances it can be quite a difficult to explain what it is about somebody’s behaviour that has frightened us.

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. It is important to recognise that individuals with mental health problems are not necessarily a risk on this basis – in fact 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
- 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).

Whilst there is no strict legal definition of 'stalking', 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?

Property damage may be associated with a number of elements including:

- rage or frustration
- revenge
- the desire to harm something the victim cares about
- a wish to undermine the victim's belief in a safe environment
- as a form of threat.

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.

Is the person abusing drugs or alcohol?

Alcohol and drug use loosens peoples' behavioural codes and there is research that suggests that substance abuse compounds the violence risk among those who are already mentally ill.

Final words

Use of mobile technology

One of the modern myths is that mobile telephones help to keep us safe. They don't. Mobile telephones 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.

The only purpose a cellular 'phone has in personal safety terms is to communicate a problem and in extreme situations, it would not be possible to reach for a telephone – let alone dial a number.

Useful telephone numbers:

101 Non-emergency Police which, although a national number, will automatically route to the nearest station.

Use this number if you want advice and guidance or to report a crime in non-emergency situations.

The number can be dialled from land-lines and mobile telephones.

112 Police – Fire – Ambulance (and sometimes Coast Guard)

Used by many European countries, this can be dialled from a land-line too.

Always use this number instead of 999 if you are on your mobile telephone as it will get you through to the emergency service faster. You do not need credit on your telephone (or for some handsets even a sim card inserted) for this number to work.

112 must only be used in an emergency. The Police define an emergency as a situation when:

- someone is a risk of getting injured
- threats are being made against a person
- a crime is being committed and is in progress
- there is danger to life
- there is risk of injury.

999 Police – Fire – Ambulance (and sometimes Coast Guard)

Can be dialled from a mobile telephone or landline.

The criteria for an emergency remains the same as for the 112 number shown above.

111 NHS Direct

This is the NHS non-emergency number, where members of the public can receive medical advice and guidance.

Free to ring from a landline or mobile telephone, this service is supported by healthcare professionals who are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

ICE ICE (In Case of Emergency) is not a telephone number, but a way of communicating to police or medical staff whom they should contact in an emergency situation when the owner of the telephone is not able to share next of kin information.

In an emergency, the emergency services can scroll through the 'Contacts' list on a telephone to find ICE numbers. Even if a telephone has a screen pin number on it, the sim card can be removed so that the address book is accessed on another telephone. Telephones which have a sim pin lock cannot be accessed.

To add ICE contacts, choose your closest relatives/friends/next of kin (it is a good idea to let people know you are doing this).

Open the address book or contacts section on your mobile telephone and create a new entry with the name ICE. Then add the contact information for your chosen emergency contact. It is also a good idea to enter additional information about the contact, including his or her name and relationship to you under "Notes" or in another unused field.

Some people add a dash or a space after the word "ICE" followed by the person's first name, so that emergency personnel know who they are calling, and place an order of calling.

An entry might look like this:

ICE 1 - Husband – 07976 xxxxxx

ICE 2 - Sister – 07976 xxxxx

ICE 3 - Son – 07976 xxxxx.

Mobile technology and tracing

With the popularity of cellular technology and smartphones, a wealth of applications (apps) have been developed which enable people to be traced through their mobile telephone.

Apple, Windows and Android stores have a number of free downloadable programmes 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 important emphasis is on being traceable and not being trackable, and whilst open to huge abuse, some of these programmes can work well. The ability to see where a family member or partner is located can be a reassuring tool, but users have to remember to turn their 'location' service off in the telephone's settings if they do not want to be found!

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 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 be aware 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 issues 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.

Other sources of help

As mentioned earlier, one of your key sources of help should be your own council's safety procedures. Often these will include policies around Lone Working, and general support associated with safety in the councillor role.

Externally, there are many independent charities and businesses who provide expertise around personal safety, and an internet search will guide you to some of the higher profile organisations. The Suzy Lamplugh Trust is particularly well known for the quality of their advice. Their website is: <http://www.suzylamplugh.org>.

And finally

Read out of context, this article makes grim reading. It implies that we live in a violent and unsafe world where peoples' behaviour is frightening and unpredictable. This is not true: we live in a world where by far the majority of people are friendly and gentle, and where many kind acts go unnoticed and unreported.

Personal safety is about valuing ourselves; taking sensible steps to minimise risk, so that we are confident and comfortable in our councillor role.

So be safe – and please don't have nightmares.

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LGiU is an award winning think-tank and local authority membership organisation. Our mission is to strengthen local democracy to put citizens in control of their own lives, communities and local services. We work with local councils and other public services providers, along with a wider network of public, private and third sector organisations.



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