

Personal Safety Guidance for Members

Health and safety training is offered to all Members in Barnet, and this is particularly relevant for potential lone working/out-of-hours duties where they may be more vulnerable for several reasons.

As a lone worker you face the same hazards as other workers in that it is often safe to work alone, but the *potential* for harm is greater, given that you will not have colleagues available to assist you if things go wrong, such as in the event of abuse or violence from a member of the public, sudden illness, theft or fire.

You are classed as a lone worker if you are separated from your colleagues, for all of some of the time when carrying out your role. You might also be travelling alone between different sites, including after dark.

For many lone workers, violence or a physical assault is the only hazard that they consider, but this is not the case. Any situation can be considered higher risk than usual when you work alone, such as fire, theft, or sudden illness.

Ward Surgeries

Councillors' contact with residents is usually rewarding and non-adversarial but sometimes a resident may have not been able to resolve a problem via other means and may display anger and frustration. Training for Members on defusing conflict is provided at induction and can be requested when needed.

You are free to choose your own venue for Ward Surgeries or to hold these online. For face-to-face Surgeries, the Governance Service recommends that you carry out a risk assessment in advance and takes note of any suggested changes, including a complete change of venue if appropriate. A dynamic risk assessment considers all possible hostile elements that may not be obvious at the time the risk assessment is carried out, such as drug or alcohol abuse in a member of the public attending your surgery.

Physical abuse is rare, but it is helpful to prepare and plan for the possibility of physical abuse, to reduce the risks even further. Be aware that verbal abuse can escalate to physical abuse. Mini risk-assessments should be carried out both before and during your activities as a Ward Councillor. Also try to make early choices that reduce risk of harm and follow the guidance provided.

Essential safety tips

Ward Surgeries

It can be difficult for Members to balance the risk of conducting Ward Surgeries within a private confidential space, communicated to residents so that it is accessible and

supportive, against any potential risks due to working in relative isolation. The Governance Service provides a risk assessment checklist and monitors this annually, to ensure that Members have fully considered all possible risks when selecting a venue. All points on the checklist should be carefully considered and periodically monitored. The checklist is attached – please carry this out whenever you plan to start up or change a Ward Surgery venue and send to governanceservice@barnet.gov.uk.

- Make sure you are familiar with the venues' emergency evacuation procedures and that there is safe access/egress for all
- Ideally, set up an appointment system so that you are prepared in advance and will not be meeting people unknown to you when alone
- It is recommended that you only use venues where staff will be present and visible to you throughout your Surgery, such as a room with glass panels/door panels
- Consider anything in your Surgery that has the potential to be used as a weapon and remove this.
- Check in advance that visitors are not able to lock the door to your Surgery from the inside
- Sit closer to the door than visitors, so that your exit cannot be blocked
- Choose surgery venues with wi-fi and use of a landline telephone, or ensure that there is a reliable mobile phone signal and that your phone is charged
- Be prepared to be faced with a range of emotions from residents
- Keep records of interactions, including names of attendees. Asking attendees to pre-register can improve your feelings of safety. This can also help you to be better prepared, such as knowing how many people will be attending and what they wish to discuss
- Arrange to have a 'body code' with a buddy to indicate that the buddy should come and assist by politely asking the visitor to leave if needed
- Report any suspicious behaviour in accordance with the venue's safety guidance, and report back to the council via the incident reporting system (details below)
- Ensure in advance that you have a procedure for requesting first aid or the assistance of security staff
- Familiarise yourself in advance with the fire safety arrangements in the venue and check with any non-council venue that alarms are regularly tested.

General

- Try to make sure your itinerary is always known to someone else
- It is important that you ensure you have adequate provision for the task you are carrying out, including first aid
- It is not recommended that Elected Members with less experience such as those newly elected, begin their ward surgeries in isolation as they may be less aware of potential hazards.
- Personal alarms are available on request

- Always have a charged mobile phone with you
- Always call '999' if you are in immediate danger and report all non-urgent incidents (such as persistent harassment, hate crime, threats, assault etc) to the police and to the council
- Do not display any valuables
- Attend personal safety training offered by the Governance Service
- Review lighting in car parks and paths to and from venues in advance if the area is unknown to you
- Do not walk through areas where you feel uncomfortable or suspect are unsafe, stick to well-lit paths, don't take short cuts and walk with other people if possible
- Plan your journeys in advance
- Avoiding entering people's homes and try to meet in a public place unless the resident is well known to you. Use suitable locations for meetings such as council premises during opening times when other people are around.
- Lone workers need to be sufficiently experienced and responsible to work alone – know when to stop or withdraw from a situation, and avoid panic reactions
- Be careful about personal information posted online
- Always keep a log of any unacceptable behaviour, with the date, time and signature in case future actions is required. Sharing this with the council and other Members will help to continually review personal safety strategies.
- Verbal communications and phone calls can be recorded with recording machines or mobile phones. Threats on social media or email can be saved or screenshot. Instances of stalking can be recorded with CCTV footage or with photographs, but only if you feel safe to do so.

Harassment, intimidation, and abuse (including online abuse)

Those working in public office are facing increasing levels of harassment, intimidation and abuse though serious incidents are rare. The Local Government Association (LGA) provides advice on handling abuse and intimidation and has a reporting mechanism. Any incidents of harassment, intimidation, or abuse (conduct which makes you feel unsafe or uncomfortable), should be reported to the police who have a duty to take your report seriously. The most important factor in determining whether you need to report an incident is the impact it is having on **you individually**, regardless of what others may think. You are not expected to tolerate abuse in your role as a Councillor.

Online abuse can include shared content on social media, or direct messages with threats of violence, abusive language, smear campaigns and bullying, including via online meeting platforms such as Zoom or Teams. Some behaviours are classed as a criminal offence, such as malicious or threatening communications and persistent messages or threats, under the Malicious Communications Act (1988) and Protection of Freedoms act (2012).

Preventive measures could include setting out your own rules of engagement on your social media, carefully considering the tone and timing of your own posts and the information that

you share. Try to de-escalate situations by taking time out before responding, or not responding at all and using social media platforms to block users if necessary. Share information if you wish to but always feel free to step away from a conflict situation.

Keep a record of threatening or abusive communications and always report these to the police and the Head of Governance (see below). Also feedback in general on safety issues will always assist the council and the police to address concerns strategically and increase safety for all.

Declaring sensitive interests

Under the Localism Act there is an obligation for members to publicly declare Interests for reasons of transparency in decision making. Section 32 of the Act deals with sensitive interests where the disclosure of such an interest (pecuniary or non-pecuniary) on the register or at a meeting may lead to violence or intimidation (towards a Member, Co-opted Member, or person connected with either). Councillors should contact the Monitoring Officer if they consider that this section applies to them. There may be circumstances where if it is in relation to an address the whole or part of the address does not appear on the public register.

The register must not include the interest on the register but may state that the Member or Co-opted Member has in interest, the details of which are withheld. The Member or Co-opted Member does not need to disclose the interest but merely the fact that they have a disclosable pecuniary interest in the matter concerned.ⁱ

Reporting mechanisms

Always dial 999 in an emergency before contacting the council or anyone else

Non-urgent incident, such as reporting ongoing harassment, hate crime: [Report a crime or incident | Police.uk \(www.police.uk\)](#) or Dial 101

Report a concern to the Head of Governance
- Andrew.Charlwood@Barnet.gov.uk or Tracy.scollin@barnet.gov.uk

Report any concerns to the council regarding an adult or child:

[Adults Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub \(MASH\) | Barnet Council](#)

[Worried about the safety of a child | Barnet Council](#)

Report Hate Crime: [Hate Crime Reporting Centres | Barnet Council](#)

Barnet incident reporting:

<https://barnetcouncil.sharepoint.com/sites/BWSHaW/SiteAssets/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fsites%2FBWSHaW%2FSiteAssets%2FSitePages%2FHealth-and-Safety-Policies-and-Arrangements%2FSection-04-Accident-Incident-Reporting-Sept-2021%2Epdf&parent=%2Fsites%2FBWSHaW%2FSiteAssets%2FSitePages%2FHealth-and-Safety-Policies-and-Arrangements>

Phones, personal alarms, personal safety Apps

Personal alarms and mobile phones are useful to request help quickly but should not replace a well-planned preventative approach. There are many ways to reduce the risk of violence and aggression. Safety apps are available for mobile phones such as Solo Protect and HollieGuard. More information on the safe use of personal alarms: [Personal alarms | Suzy Lamplugh Trust](#).

The Governance Service can provide personal alarms upon request.

Further reading

[Civility in public life | Local Government Association](#)

[Practical advice for handling physical abuse and personal security | Local Government Association](#) (includes advice on home safety)

[LGIU-Personal-safety-for-councillors.pdf](#)

[Get Safe Online | The UK's leading Internet Safety Website](#)

[Microsoft Word - 130805 WLGA social Media Guidance for Councillors.doc](#)

[Countering extremism and tackling hate crime – how councils are driving innovation through partnership working | Local Government Association](#)

[H&S arrangement 21 – Lone Working \(barnet.gov.uk\)](#)

ⁱ [Localism Act 2011 - Explanatory Notes \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)