

## Personal Safety for Members

Incidents of violence towards public figures is rare, however, councillors have high profile public roles, are constantly interacting with members of the community and can be the victims of verbal or written abuse. They may experience harassment and stalking and online abuse.

It is important therefore that councillors understand the steps they should take to keep themselves safe. This guidance note for members will signpost you to resources that can help and outline some of the measures that can be taken to reduce risk and ensure safety.

Members should seek guidance from their corporate health and safety advisors or Heads of Democratic Services about the specific guidance in place locally and be mindful of the risks when for example:

- Visiting people in their homes
- Receiving callers to your home
- Holding surgeries
- Travelling, whether on public or private transport and when alone
- Communicating online

If, as a member, you have a specific concern or you feel you at risk, speak to your corporate health and safety advisor, Head of Democratic Services or Monitoring Officer. You may be able to access relevant training or safety or security equipment to help protect you in your role.

### Useful Resources

- **Personal Safety Guidance for Councillors** - The Local Government Information Unit LGIU has published guidance specifically for members covering what to do in these situations which can be found here.

<https://www.lgiu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Personal-safety-for-elected-members.pdf>

- **Personal Safety Advice** - There is also a range of excellent online advice available from the Susie Lamplugh Trust which covers for example:
  - canvassing and campaigning,
  - dealing with aggression
  - stalking
  - lone working
  - personal alarms
  - hate crime and
  - internet safety.
- <https://www.suzylamplugh.org/Pages/FAQs/Category/personal-safety> **Online Abuse Guidance for Councillors** - The WLGA has published guidance for dealing with online abuse available here. **Get Safe Online guidance** - More information on online safety is available from the government supported website, *Get Safe Online*. This covers everything from protecting your devices to social networking to information security.

<https://www.getsafeonline.org/>

- **Recognising the Terrorist Threat Guidance** - The national counter terrorism security office has useful information about dealing with suspect packages and knowing what to do in the event of terrorist threats.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/recognising-the-terrorist-threat/recognising-the-terrorist-threat>

If you are in any doubt about the actions you should take to ensure your personal safety speak to your corporate health and safety advisor or Head of Democratic Services for support.

### **Abuse and bullying within the council**

Local government has a strict statutory Code of Conduct which sets out clear expectations of behaviour and conduct for members. However, in some cases councillors do not come forward if they have been the victims of bullying or harassment as they believe that their concerns may be dismissed as “banter” or political rough and tumble”. The WLGA encourages all members to challenge bad behaviour when they see it and to ensure that support is offered to members who experience it.

#### **More information here (link to another webpage)\***

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#### **\*Abuse and bullying within the council webpage**

The Leader of the WLGA Cllr Debbie Wilcox has said

“When I first became Leader of this body I stated that I wanted to put equality and respect, in all its forms, high on the agenda.

Local government is perhaps better placed than others; we have a strict statutory code of conduct which sets out clear expectations of behaviour and conduct; we provide training and have local resolution processes to manage lower level councillor-on-councillor complaints. I was pleased to see that councillor complaints made to the Ombudsman last year were at their lowest for over a decade; given last year was an election year, that’s no mean feat! I also understand that few Ombudsman complaints over the recent years have related to bullying and/or inappropriateness.

But we cannot assume that all is rosy in our garden, we cannot assume that everyone feels comfortable and confident enough to come forward if they are a victim of bullying or harassment. There are no doubt many people who have stayed silent, too intimidated or scared to come forward or who have turned a blind eye or excused an inappropriate comment as mere ‘banter’.

As councillors we all set out to do the right thing for our the most vulnerable in our communities; but we shouldn’t forget that some of those amongst us, some of us in this council chamber, may be vulnerable too; after all the cut and thrust of politics, we are all just human beings at the end of the day.

We aspire to encourage more diverse and younger talent to come through our ranks and to be our leaders of tomorrow. What worries me most is that many of the alleged victims are young women, early on in their professional or political careers. How many and how much potential has been lost as a result, if these early experiences meant that they turned their back on politics or public life? local democracy and politics is not a huge appeal to many in our communities and our collective reputation risks being eroded further.

We therefore need to draw a line.

We as leaders and senior members must ensure that we encourage, support and cultivate a culture that anyone and everyone can feel at home in and contribute fully within. I think we need to be positive and proactive, we should adopt a zero-tolerance stand, we must challenge bad behaviour when we see it or hear it. We have processes in place, but we need to reassure ourselves that these processes are robust, that people can come forward if necessary and that support is available and will be offered to both parties involved in a complaint"

All council Leaders have agreed to support a commitment to end bullying and inappropriate conduct and to ensure that there are robust processes in place in every council to address this.

Councillors who have experienced bullying or other inappropriate behaviour are advised

- Not to tolerate it
- To follow any formal reporting process in place in the council
- To raise any concerns with your Group Leader, Group Whip, a trusted colleague or the council's Monitoring officer.
- If appropriate take advantage of any confidential counselling service offered by your council