

## **Personal safety for councillors**

### **FAQs**

#### **1. What should you do if you live in a rural area with low mobile coverage and you need to call for help?**

Over 90 per cent of the UK now received 4G or 5G signal, but there are still many rural areas which remains without coverage. However, even if your mobile telephone does not show a signal, this does not mean that you are not able to telephone 999 or 112 via a different network. Emergency calls are routed automatically across all networks, so whilst your telephone may not show a signal, other networks may still function.

Consider options when your telephone contract comes up for renewal. Do other providers provide signal, 4G or both? The coverage maps companies advertise are not always accurate, so consider trying before you buy. Most companies give you a 14-day cooling off period, you could use this time to test your new sim and telephone in the areas where traditionally you have not received a signal.

There are systems, such as LoneAlert, which have the facility to monitor lone workers via GPS technology, but these require an organisational commitment which come at a cost. It may be worth having a conversation with your council to see what they can offer.

In the meantime, pay particularly attention to planning your activities, particularly home visits and meetings. If you can, take someone with you and try to organise your surgery where you have access to a landline (libraries are useful for this) – or Wi-Fi, if you are able to use Wi-Fi calling – and risk assess carefully so you're less reliant on your phone.

#### **2. Why should I report low-level incidents like ASB to the police?**

You may have reported incidents many times and felt that they were not followed up, but reporting is incredibly important for you and others. Taking the opportunity to share your experience is important to your resilience. Reporting incidents can also enables the police and local authorities to build up a picture of local incidents, identify regular offenders and provide intelligence that informs local policing decisions. Low-level and non-critical incidents can be reported via the 101 number – or report it online.

#### **3. If you live alone and are going to meet someone in your role as councillor, who should you inform of your whereabouts?**

It sounds so easy to appoint a “someone”, but as mentioned if you aren't in a busy household and live alone, it can be more of a challenge. Options might include:

- Buddy with another Councillor who is in a similar position. They don't have to be in the same party as you – personal safety transcends politics.
- Ask a friend or neighbour. In the session, there was an examples of a Councillor who dropped a note through her neighbour's letterbox when she went out, just to say where she was going and what time she would be back.
- Share your electronic diary with others (if you are not sure how to do this, your Council's IT department should be able to show you how to go about doing this). You

can choose the type of appointments you want to share, so it is possible to just show Council meetings/appointments.

Your Democratic Services team may have other suggestions, too.

### **3 How do you deal with possibly aggressive dogs outside while canvassing? How can we avoid dog bites, and what should I do if it happens?**

First of all, notice any signs which may indicate that there are dogs on the property and risk assess whether you want to door knock in the first instance.

Dogs often become aggressive when they are frightened. Even if an owner has their animal on a lead, it is good practice to keep a good distance between you and a dog who is barking and appears aggressive. Have something on hand to act as a barrier between your body and a dog, for example a packed rucksack or have biscuits in your pocket which you can throw on the ground to distract the dog.

If a dog comes too close, don't be tempted to try to kick it away with your foot; a foot is easy to grasp – once pulled, you would then be unbalanced. If you ever found yourself pulled to the floor, the main advice is to curl up into the foetal position to protect your "soft" areas.

Even if you are a confirmed dogaholic, you should still take care. Be careful in the way you behave on first meeting. Experts often advise avoiding direct eye contact or baring teeth when you smile. Both of these can be challenges to a hyper-sensitive dog. Keep your hands close to you and tilt your body so that you are not squared up. Dogs do not like peoples' hands above their head and may react adversely to this. Always ask an owner's permission before petting their dog.

Dog attacks are rare, although they do happen. If you are bitten by a dog, if your skin is broken (even slightly) you need to wash the wound as soon as possible under fresh, warm, flowing water to wash out bacteria in the wound. You should also attend hospital without delay because you may need a Tetanus shot.

From a legal point of view:

- Find out the owner's name and address (they may refuse to provide this)
- Get the names and contact details from anyone who witnessed the attack
- Make a written record, whilst your memory is good and fresh
- Take a photograph of your injuries, with a date stamp on it (a mobile telephone will embed this in the photograph's data file)
- Call the police and report the incident
- If the dog is linked to an owner and property, also tell your Council – they need to place a note on file so that other people are aware that there is an aggressive dog at the house.

### **4. What is the law around filming or recording encounters with people in public where there might not be other witnesses? For example, if you're feeling threatened, can you use your mobile phone to film an incident?**

In general terms, you are within your legal rights to film or record people in a public place (some shopping centres have rules saying that you cannot), so location is part of the answer to your question. There's an interesting [Recording law website](#) which you may find helpful.

However, before recording evaluate the situation as to whether this will escalate or deescalate the situation. Are they likely to back down because they know that you are capturing their behaviour or will it aggravate the situation?

#### **5. Could you list the products discussed in the session, particularly the spray alarm?**

When picking a personal alarm, choose one which is really loud! There are plenty of websites selling alarms, so consider which one would work for you: pull cord, button – or aerosol. During the presentation we looked at the “Walk Easy”, but there are other options on the market. Try to avoid supermarket/DIY store versions in favour of higher decibel devices.

In terms of professional GPS tracker devices, there are quite a few systems on the market. Popular ones are Solo Protect and Overt.

#### **6. Do you have any tips for disabled councillors with limited mobility?**

Mobility is a spectrum and we all have different abilities so this answer can vary. Plan activities where you can, including checking accessibility in advance so you can avoid situations which are inaccessible. Minimise house visits by finding other ways to connect with your residents, particularly if you are not familiar with the terrain. Any environment where you would find it difficult to leave smoothly should be risk assessed properly. You can then make a decision whether the risk is acceptable or not. If you need to use taxis consider booking them in advance as taxis that accommodate wheelchairs aren't always easily available.

When you meet people, be aware of personal spacing. Keep people literally at “arm's length”. Coronavirus and social distancing may work in all our favour at the moment as people are tending to stand a bit further away than they would do normally.

If you use an adjustment or aid like a stick or wheelchair, posture is still important. It is important that all of us look confident and assertive as we go about our role. A good, straight head position is a great way of communicating confidence.

#### **7. Are 101 calls chargeable?**

Calls to non-emergency 101 used to be charged at 15p per connection. As from March 2020, the Government changed their policy and the 101 is now free to dial. It is useful to know that 999, 112 and 101 calls can be dialled from a mobile telephone, even if the caller does not have credit on their telephone.

#### **8. Are councils responsible for councillor safety?**

Councils do have some responsibilities in terms of safety, particularly in relation to when you're on council premises, but it depends on what activity you are doing. However, Councillors remain responsible for managing their own personal safety. Every authority has their own approach to the safety of their Members, with many taking the safety of councillors very seriously. We would encourage you to talk to your Democratic Services team (or Clerk)

to find out what arrangements already exist. It's important to remember that no matter what arrangements exist, we still must take an active role in managing our own personal safety.

**9. Should Councils encourage councillors to use the same safety App in order to provide continuity?**

For staff who visit members of the public in their own homes or businesses, as mentioned in our webinar, some councils are extending 'smart' tracker/apps to Councillors, although again, this is very patchy across the UK.

It might be worth talking with your authority to see if there is an opportunity to standardise. If you are affiliated to a political party, there might be an opportunity to join together and choose an app.

**10. Would the loud alarm on safety apps/alarms also confuse the victim?**

It shouldn't confuse the person who sets the alarm off, because they initiated it, so they should be anticipating the noise. However, if you buy a really loud alarm, it might make you jump when first initiated. This is not necessarily a bad thing as it might give you surge of adrenalin.