



# Personal Safety Advice for Tameside Councillors

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# A Guide to Personal Safety for Tameside Councillors

An important role of a Tameside Councillor is to be available for residents and communities including helping individuals with any problems they might have. These contacts are usually rewarding and non-adversarial. However, occasionally Tameside Councillors can find themselves in a position where they need to manage angry and frustrated residents who often contact their elected representative when they feel that they have no other avenue to pursue. Tameside Councillors deal with constituents on a face-to-face basis when alone in a ward surgery or a home visit as well as simply out and about. Tameside Councillors also may well be a target for aggression simply by being a public figure or as a member of a particular political party.

The purpose of this guide is to set out what actions and security measures you can take to reduce the risks to your everyday Personal Safety as well as what to do in more difficult, confrontational situations where you are concerned for your safety.

This guide does not cover working practices linked to limiting the spread of Covid. Please contact Tameside Council for the latest advice for safe working and Covid.

Most Tameside Councillors will not experience any problems during their term(s) of office, but a little time given to preparation and planning can help to reduce any risk.

## General Good Practice Personal Safety Tips

- ▶ Preparation – assess the risks
- ▶ Alert attitude
- ▶ Look confident
- ▶ Avoid risk
- ▶ Never assume it can't happen to you
- ▶ Plan ahead
- ▶ Do your research
- ▶ Listen to your gut
- ▶ Carry out dynamic risk assessment continually
- ▶ Leave/end a meeting if something doesn't feel right

## Risk Assessment

You should always carry out a risk assessment prior to any new activity or event. You should also conduct dynamic risk assessment at all times. Although for a large event a formal recorded risk assessment would be required, for everyday activities just thinking through the activity yourself can be enough.

It can be helpful to think of the 3 Ws – **WHO? WHERE? WHAT?**

### Who?

Who are you going to see? Do you know them? Can you find out anything about them before the meeting? Do they have a history of being difficult? Are drugs, alcohol, mental health issues or stress likely to have an impact on their behaviour? Are there multiple people going to be present? Are they aggrieved and likely to be angry?

### Where?

Where are you seeing them - in their home, in a public space? Will there be security available? Are you alone or will there be other people around? Do you know the local area, where to park or walk safely? Is there an issue with gangs or others hanging about?

### What?

What are you seeing them for? Is it to help them? Do they have a complaint? Have you got negative or positive news for them? Are you challenging their behaviour in any way?

Thinking through the 3 Ws before embarking on a meeting or visit can help you to plan which strategies will keep you safe. If you know someone has a history of being difficult then you would not meet them alone in their home.

Always try to:

**Avoid, reduce, and manage risk.**

Below are some safe working practices to integrate into your everyday behaviour or implement following your risk assessment.

## Working Alone

If you are working alone, consider the following:

- ▶ Carry out a risk assessment – if you are in any doubt discuss the risks with another Tameside Councillor or officer. If there are several risks associated with a particular activity don't do it. Ensure you are not alone or rearrange it to a safer environment.
- ▶ Ensure someone always knows where you are:
- ▶ Leave details of where you are going and how long you expect to be with a colleague, friend, or partner
- ▶ Make regular check-in calls to a colleague, friend or partner or ask them to call you at regular intervals
- ▶ If you change your plans – let someone know
- ▶ Keep your mobile accessible, switched on and charged
- ▶ Consider carrying a personal alarm or installing a personal safety app on your phone
- ▶ Vary your routines – don't be predictable where you park or walk.
- ▶ Team up with another Tameside Councillor in your own or a neighbouring ward and keep in touch via WhatsApp

## Ward Surgeries

Since Covid, many more Tameside Councillors are choosing to hold surgeries over the phone, using WhatsApp or internet options such as Zoom. Consider these options first as these reduce the risks to your Personal Safety. They are Covid secure and accessible to people who have mobility issues. However, you may feel that this is not appropriate for all your constituents.

If you do need to hold a face-to-face surgery, there are a range of strategies you could employ to reduce the risks. Some of these may appear excessive and against the natural democratic ideals of having access to elected representatives. They will, however, help to reduce the risks to yourself and any other volunteers who may be involved in helping organise your surgeries.

This guide does not cover working practices linked to limiting the spread of Covid. Please contact Tameside Council for the latest advice for safe working and Covid.

### Choosing premises

- ▶ Consider the premises very carefully – do not use locations that are isolated where you will be working alone.
- ▶ Choose Premises and rooms that have:
  - ▶ other members of staff nearby in case you need assistance – such as Tameside Council premises like libraries during opening hours
  - ▶ a reception area where visitors' names are recorded
  - ▶ a comfortable waiting area where visitors can be observed
  - ▶ easy access to a landline or an alarm linked to reception
  - ▶ a clear and agreed procedure for dealing with a call for assistance
  - ▶ a view of reception
  - ▶ a vision panel in the door
  - ▶ a swift means of escape
  - ▶ visitors are not able to lock the door from the inside
- ▶ If you are currently holding surgeries alone, discuss how this can be overcome with fellow Tameside Councillors or Tameside Council officers. You could buddy up with other Tameside Councillors and run a surgery together or run your surgery in another organisation's premises such as CAB
- ▶ When you advertise surgeries ask people to email or phone for an appointment giving their name and address and the general subject of their query. This allows you or someone to research the person, check that they are a genuine constituent and check out any history they may have before agreeing to a face-to-face appointment. If you have any concerns offer a telephone, WhatsApp or Zoom appointment first

- ▶ When you advertise surgeries give the date, times, and general location but not the exact address. Let people know the location a short time before. This means it is more difficult for anyone to carry out a premeditated attack. Try to vary times, days, and locations
- ▶ Have a plan for any helpers or reception staff regarding what to do if they have concerns or in an emergency that you review and test regularly. This could include having an emergency word or phrase you can use to ask for assistance
- ▶ Wherever you hold the surgery consider the layout of the room you are in. For example, sit nearest to the door with the constituents seated on the other side of the table. Seating is best set out at an angle of 45 degrees (seating directly opposite can be confrontational). Make sure there are no items in the room that could be used as weapons
- ▶ If there is no panic alarm in the space that you are using, have a personal alarm readily available so you can quickly summon help
- ▶ Report any incidents using the accident and incident reporting forms available on the Tameside Council intranet. Send to [healthandsafety@tameside.gov.uk](mailto:healthandsafety@tameside.gov.uk) with Robert Landon (Head of Democratic Services) in cc

## Home Visits

Tameside Councillors do sometimes visit residents in their homes, especially those who are elderly, have a disability, have additional needs or where they simply want to see for themselves the conditions that are the subject of complaints. If possible, you should visit with another person. This person does not have to take part in the conversation but provides support in the event of an incident. It can also help to prevent unwarranted accusations of impropriety or theft.

Most Tameside Councillors trust their own instincts as to whether to meet someone alone. However, if you have any doubts about the safety of the premises you are to visit, and the purpose of the visit is not about the premises itself, then arrange for the meeting to take place at a neutral venue.

### Planning home visits

- ▶ Understand the reason for the personal visit and try to get some information from officers prior to your visit; this not only makes the meeting more meaningful, but it may also highlight any Personal Safety concerns others have had in the past
- ▶ You can also carry out an internet search on the person to help you decide if a home visit is appropriate
- ▶ Arrange the visit during normal working and daylight hours
- ▶ Let somebody know who you are visiting, providing details of address, date and time of the visit, and expected duration
- ▶ Consider calling the person before the meeting to confirm arrangements and establish their mood/state of mind
- ▶ During the call find out if they are alone or not – a relative, neighbour or friend may be in attendance to support them, however this comes with more risks to you
- ▶ Set up a code word or phrase for use on the telephone that you can use to raise the alarm. This needs to be something you have agreed with someone which will alert them that you think you might have a problem
- ▶ Park in a well-lit area near other vehicles but so you can easily get away
- ▶ Take as little with you as possible so your hands are free
- ▶ Ensure your mobile is fully charged and available in a pocket
- ▶ Have a prepared excuse to leave if you need to

### During a home visit

- ▶ Stay alert when approaching the property and look around the environment for threats such as people hanging about, groups or dogs
- ▶ Avoid entering or using lifts or stairwells if you feel ill at ease



- ▶ After knocking, stand back and slightly sideways so that you present a narrow, protected target. Do not stand on the edge of any steps
- ▶ Ask for any dogs or other pets to be secured
- ▶ Assess the situation and mood of the resident and any other people present. If in any doubt or you feel threatened, do not enter, make an excuse, and leave
- ▶ Follow the occupants in when entering houses and other buildings – stay nearest to the exit
- ▶ If the person locks their door after letting you in immediately ask them to unlock it – don't wait until you are trying to escape
- ▶ Be aware of potential weapons
- ▶ Only sit down when the resident does and choose a seat nearest the door
- ▶ Where possible, sit in an upright chair as this is easier to stand up from without a barrier. If you must sit in an armchair or settee, sit on the edge near the arm which will enable you to stand up more easily
- ▶ Look for any alternative escape routes
- ▶ If the situation changes and you feel threatened, make an excuse, and leave
- ▶ Back out rather than turning your back on the resident
- ▶ If a serious situation occurs, leave immediately and report the incident

**If you are unable to leave immediately when a serious situation occurs, you can:**

- ▶ Place defensive barriers between yourself and the resident
- ▶ Continue talking to the resident, reassuring them that you mean them no harm – look at the PALMS and LEAPS models at the end of the handbook
- ▶ Set off your personal alarm, if you have one, or scream or shout to attract the attention of others. The use of reasonable force to protect yourself is a last resort

## Receiving personal callers to your home

It is easy to find out where a local Tameside Councillor lives when they are part of the community. However, remember – even though you are a councillor you are still entitled to a personal life. It is inadvisable to see an unannounced caller in your home. It is wise to always check who is at the door through a window, spyhole, or security camera before opening it. Encourage family members to do the same. If you have any doubts as to their intention, or if they appear angry or aggressive, do not open the door. Consider keeping a personal alarm by the front door so that you or any family member have a means of raising an alarm quickly.

### The following strategies can help to keep you and your family safe

- ▶ Use the Town Hall address instead of your personal address
- ▶ Don't hold any meetings at your home
- ▶ Only open the door if you feel confident it is safe to do so
- ▶ If you do open the door, politely make an excuse that you are busy but offer alternatives such as a telephone call, Zoom meeting or surgery appointment
- ▶ Maintain a physical distance
- ▶ Do not let people enter your home – step outside to talk to people, if necessary, with the door remaining open
- ▶ If more than one individual who are not known to you turn up unannounced and you are concerned that they pose a threat, it is advisable to decline to open the door and contact the police
- ▶ Once any incident is over, record the details including descriptions. Always report any incident to Tameside Council and/or the police.
- ▶ Avoid giving out personal details about your house or family in general conversation with members of the public or on social media

## Home Security

As a person with a public profile, it is advisable to maintain a decent level and awareness of home security. Additional useful information is available at **SecuredbyDesign**. The following is general advice on what to consider in making your home safe and secure:

- ▶ Try to make it clear via boundaries the difference between public and private space. Front boundaries should be kept low, so they don't provide hiding places and to enable good natural surveillance
- ▶ Keep fences and walls in a good state of repair and consider your planting to reduce the availability of handholds and to put off prospective intruders
- ▶ Remember to lock your garages, outbuildings, sheds, etc. Ensure they are fitted with high-quality and secure locking devices, and you can add extra locks if you are concerned
- ▶ Ensure tools and ladders, which could be used to access your home, are locked away, and remove anything that could potentially be used to cause damage, such as loose bricks or large stones
- ▶ If possible, keep your dustbin and recycling bins secure until collection day to prevent them being used as climbing aids.
- ▶ Obscure the view into your home by fitting blinds, curtains or film including glazed exterior doors. Get into the habit of closing curtains or blinds when occupying a well-lit room
- ▶ Do not label your keys – if you need to identify keys, use a colour-code theme, and keep control of your door keys. Do not leave keys with people you do not know e.g. trades people.
- ▶ Do not leave keys in your locks at night – keep them out of sight but easily available to those in the house
- ▶ Utilise deadlocks all the time, not just when you go on holiday
- ▶ Good external lighting is recommended to illuminate all external doors, car parking and garage areas and footpaths leading to your home at night-time
- ▶ There are many different home security products now available – some controllable from your phone. Many of these are available to set up yourself and are both cost effective and flexible. If you prefer to have an alarm or CCTV system fitted professionally the police recommend that you select an installer who is affiliated to one of the recognised alarm and CCTV inspectorate bodies such as the National Security Inspectorate or Alarms Inspection Board.

## Attending Meetings

Councillors will have to attend various public and council meetings, many of which are in the evening after dark. It is possible, depending on the nature and outcome of the meeting, that members of the public may be feeling angry or upset. In such instances there are several strategies that will reduce the risks to your Personal Safety.

- ▶ Ask to be accompanied to your vehicle or transport stop by a colleague or Tameside Council staff member after the meeting or use a taxi
- ▶ Leave the building by a side or rear exit but ensure you are not then going into a deserted area where little help will be available
- ▶ Remember that many meetings are publicly advertised so people can plan premeditated attacks. Be aware of anyone hanging about or following you
- ▶ Be aware of where and how you park – choose well-lit areas or car parks with CCTV, and park so you can get away quickly and easily
- ▶ Vary your routes to and from meeting venues if you are walking and stick to well-lit public areas
- ▶ Avoid being the last at meetings on your own in a building – leave with others

## Demonstrations

It is possible, due to the nature of difficult decisions that Tameside Councillors must make, that you may experience a protest. If this does occur:

- ▶ Stay calm – protests may feel intimidating but will not necessarily lead to a physical threat
- ▶ Remain inside, close windows and lock doors, draw blinds/curtains and telephone the police
- ▶ Do not confront, try to explain, or reason with protestors – if they get no response they will usually leave
- ▶ If you are concerned that the protest is aggressive and weapons are in evidence, if it is safe to do so, take photographs of people and vehicles, and note descriptions to pass onto the police. Do not leave the building until the police say it is safe to do so

## Travelling Safely

Most of the advice below you will already be aware of and will think of as 'commonsense'. However, at times we all become complacent especially when in familiar locations. It is good to be reminded of these simple practices that can help to keep you safe when out and about.

### Driving

- ▶ Have your car or house keys in your hand or easily accessible
- ▶ Park under street lighting and not in dark, deserted streets or isolated car parks
- ▶ Park on the ground floor in multi-storey car parks near to pedestrian exits and reverse into the parking space
- ▶ Always keep windows and doors locked when you get into the car and when leaving it (Including service stations) and never leave your key in the ignition when the car is unattended
- ▶ Don't take boxes, bags or valuables to the car when other people are around - lock them in the boot prior to leaving home or a car park
- ▶ Use the torch on your mobile phone when it is dark in a car park or approaching your vehicle
- ▶ Look around your vehicle and inside as you approach in case someone is crouching down or hiding inside
- ▶ Avoid placing handbags, valuables, laptops, mobiles, or documents on the passenger seat which could be stolen if you come to a stop or when away from the vehicle
- ▶ Park on the left-hand side of the road facing the way you want to drive off or reverse into car parking spaces for a quicker getaway, if needed
- ▶ Avoid having identifying stickers in your car
- ▶ Ensure your vehicle has sufficient fuel or charge for the journey, and refuel during daylight hours
- ▶ Keep your vehicle in good repair with regular checks and be a member of a breakdown service. Have the number of the breakdown organisation in your phone
- ▶ In the event of a breakdown do not accept a lift from a stranger; ask them to get help for you. Check the identity of any service member that comes to help you
- ▶ Do not give lifts to strangers e.g. a person who has broken down and requests a lift. If you see an incident or someone tries to flag you down, think first. Is it genuine? How can you best help? It might be safer and more helpful and practical to report the incident, or request help, on your mobile or at a garage

- ▶ If a car pulls up in front of you and causes you to stop, never turn off the engine so that you can drive off quickly if necessary. If the driver or passenger approaches, reverse back from their car as far as is safely possible and check that windows and doors are locked. If necessary, draw attention to yourself by sounding the horn and use your mobile phone to contact emergency services
- ▶ Do not get out if you are followed in your vehicle; ensure the car is locked, flash your lights, and sound your horn to attract attention. Drive to a well populated area
- ▶ Do not wind down your window if someone taps on it, unless the individual is well known to you
- ▶ Be alert to any visual changes to your vehicle. If you notice a suspicious object on or near the vehicle, do not approach or enter it. Contact the police and give them the location and registration number of your vehicle

## Public transport and taxis

When travelling by public transport there are some simple tips that can reduce the risks to your Personal Safety:

- ▶ Have the correct change, your pass or debit card to hand
- ▶ 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
- ▶ Sit on the lower deck, near the driver if a bus is empty or it is after dark
- ▶ 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 phone close to you. A common crime is for a thief to grab a phone and make a dash just as doors are closing
- ▶ If you do feel threatened, make as much noise as possible to attract the attention of the driver, guard, or other passengers
- ▶ If you can, arrange for someone to meet you at the bus stop or train station, particularly if travelling at night or in an unfamiliar area. 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 taxi company with you
- ▶ Ensure any pre-booked licensed minicab driver has ID and that it matches the driver and the vehicle's photographic licence. Check that they know the name you gave when ordering. If in doubt, do not get in the cab
- ▶ Share a taxi or minicab with a colleague and sit in the back of the car

## Cycling Safety

- ▶ Keep your bike in good working order
- ▶ Wear a fluorescent belt or jacket and always use lights at night
- ▶ Wear a cycling helmet
- ▶ Secure your bicycle with a good quality chain and padlock in a busy area
- ▶ Have a charged mobile phone readily available on your person

## Walking

- ▶ Check your route beforehand – know where you are going
- ▶ Be prepared to walk a longer way around to keep safe
- ▶ Do not take short cuts through parks, alleys, waste ground, deserted car parks or similar
- ▶ Wear comfortable shoes that you can move quickly in if you need to
- ▶ Consider carrying a personal alarm, and if you do, make sure that it is accessible
- ▶ Tuck a scarf or long hair inside your coat and carry any bag or handbag across your shoulder
- ▶ Do not stop or respond to any request from a stranger on the street when in an isolated area
- ▶ If you think you are being followed, cross the street and make for a well-populated area

## Dealing with Aggressive Phone calls and Emails

### Receiving abusive phone calls

Do not ignore nuisance or aggressive calls. They may be a sign that someone is stalking you. Look for patterns, inform colleagues and Tameside Council and involve the police if necessary. These calls may form part of a larger pattern and may be happening to other councillors or Tameside Council staff.

- ▶ If possible, use a Tameside Council number for your work rather than your personal home or mobile number
- ▶ If a call is abusive or concerning (silence or heavy breathing) hang up immediately
- ▶ Always try 1471 to see if the number is available. Make a note of the date and time of the call and complete an incident form
- ▶ If you cannot trace the number make a note of the date and time of the call. If any further calls take place complete an incident form
- ▶ If a call becomes abusive and you know the caller warn them that you are going to put the phone down, then do so. Make a note of the time, date and outline of the conversation and complete an incident form
- ▶ Report any incidents using the accident and incident reporting forms available on the Tameside Council intranet. Send to [healthandsafety@tameside.gov.uk](mailto:healthandsafety@tameside.gov.uk) with Robert Landon (Head of Democratic Services) in cc. With your consent Tameside Council may contact the police

### Electronic Communication

If you receive abusive or prolific emails, texts or messages via social media that give you cause for concern about your safety:

- ▶ Stop all communication with the person
- ▶ Seek advice on blocking messages from that person from Tameside Council and/or the police
- ▶ Inform Tameside Council via an incident form and/or the police depending on the seriousness, and forward copies of the messages
- ▶ Do not delete the emails – keep them as evidence



## Staying safe on Social Media

- ▶ If you have a public-facing Facebook or Twitter account, or website, ensure that you do not give personal details or have photographs that would enable people to know where you live, about members of your family, your date of birth (birthday photographs or comments), or other personal information
- ▶ Be aware of giving information on social media about your general whereabouts before activities such as meetings or events. Balance the need to publicise such activities with your Personal Safety. Advanced knowledge can aid a stalker or someone planning an attack
- ▶ If you use social media in a private capacity consider using a different name and check your privacy settings regularly.

## Terrorism

Although the purpose of this handbook is not to cover terrorism in detail, it provides a good opportunity to highlight the current safety advice should such an incident occur.

The main 'Stay Safe' principles are to 'Run-Hide-Tell'. If you would like more information you can refer to the **National Counter Terrorism Support Office's website**.

You can discuss your personal security with your **local counter-terrorism security adviser**.

## Handling a Difficult or Angry Person

It is possible that in the course of your work as a Tameside Councillor you will have to defuse a situation where someone has become angry. Below are two useful models that you can use to help defuse a situation.

### Communication models to help you to defuse aggressive situations.

Using effective communication models can reduce conflict and resolve tension. They promote understanding and can be useful for finding common ground as well as providing a framework to support resolution.

Two well-known communication models **LEAPS** and **PALMS** are summarised below.

#### Communication model 1 - LEAPS

**LEAPS** is a communication model that might help if you are confronted with aggressive behaviour.

The acronym stands for:

- L - Listen** actively to what the person has to say and demonstrate that with your body language. Make sure you identify key pieces of information you may need later.
- E - Empathise** with what is being said and demonstrate that you are concerned about the situation and the feelings it is causing.
- A - Ask** questions to find out more so that you know exactly what you are dealing with and can start to formulate how you may be able to help resolve it in some way. Ask open, general questions. Don't use closed questions that simply invite the answers "yes" and "no". You can use the TED style of questions or statements. For example "Tell me...", "explain to me...", "describe to me...". For example, "Tell me about the problem you are having with your neighbour...", "Please take your time...", "Take me back to the very beginning". Don't panic if there is silence. Ask an open question and let them fill the gap.
- P - Paraphrase** facts into your own words and check out with the person that you have understood these correctly. Angry people often repeat themselves and bring up a lot of different issues at once making it difficult to work out exactly what the problem is.
- S - Summarise** a course of agreed action by identifying clear actions that you can go through with the person. Be clear about who is going to do what and when by. If necessary write this down for the person.

#### Communication model 2 - PALMS

The **PALMS** model is designed to help you to communicate to the other person that you do not want to confront or fight them, but instead you want to help them.

- P - Position** - Be aware of where you are and what is around, i.e. exit routes. Ensure the person does not feel trapped or hemmed in. Let them see any exit routes. The person needs to see a way past you. If you block the possibility of 'flight' they may see little choice but to fight. Equally, ensure that you are not blocked in.
- A - Attitude** - Display a positive and helpful attitude and try to avoid sending the conflict around in a circle. Smile and talk calmly as it is your responsibility to emphasise a willingness to help and find a solution to the problem.
- L - Look and Listen** - Make normal eye contact and demonstrate active listening. Eye contact is vital in signalling non-aggression. Maintain a normal level of eye contact, do not stare. Demonstrate active listening with appropriate head nodding, gestures and repeating phrases you hear to show you understand.
- M - Make Space** - Maintain a comfortable distance from the person. Do not invade someone's intimate space. Create and measure personal space using the following as guidance:
  - ▶ Can you see the other person's feet? ▶ Do you feel a vague sense of discomfort?
  - ▶ Would they have to take a step forward to touch (hit) you?
- S - Stance** - Relaxed and slightly side on for safety and balance. Stand slightly to one side of the person and place one foot backwards to support you. Open your stance to show the route to an exit.



Personal Safety ▶ Lone Working ▶ Training & Consultancy

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