

**Corporate Health & Safety Procedure**

**Personal Safety Guide 4**  
**Public Interface**

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## 1. Reception points

The reception or waiting area must be given thought to begin with and made as welcoming as possible so as not to have a negative effect on either people coming into it as visitors or the people who have to work there. A bright, warm, comfortable setting will not guarantee good humour but can be calming rather than irritating. Research has proved the following steps to be effective

- Using pastel colours
- Putting plants and/or flowers in waiting areas
- Using light & airy rooms
- Providing comfortable seating
- Making reading material available
- Providing play area and/or toys for children
- Playing background music or providing TV
- Putting in drinks machines/water coolers
- Ensuring there are toilet & baby changing facilities
- Installing a telephone so people waiting can make calls if necessary
- Avoiding stressful noise such as loud music, irritating public address systems or machine noise.
- Providing adequate & accessible parking so people do not arrive frustrated.
- Providing directions, maps, details of money required in car parks and so on so people can arrive prepared.

These steps can be cost-effective and make a difference because

- People feel welcomed and expected
- It appears that the organization has respect for its visitors & and concern for their comfort
- People are less likely to feel anonymous, like a number waiting in line
- Waiting is relatively pleasurable so people do not become increasingly uncomfortable, tense and irritated.
- The provision of books magazines, refreshments creates diversion and interest avoiding boredom.
- Difficulty finding the building, a parking place and so on is minimised therefore so is frustration

People report that the thing most guaranteed to wind them up whilst waiting is not knowing how long they will be expected to wait or not knowing what is going on. A practical way of managing appointments/waiting time is therefore essential.

Ticket systems can be utilised and whilst people may not entirely like the numbered approach it does help to indicate how close they are to being seen.

Receptionists can be trained to give callers an estimated waiting time but this can backfire if the time is then not adhered to.

The most straightforward way of managing time is to arrange appointments whenever possible. It is essential to allow a realistic time for each appointment if

this system is to work otherwise a queue will build up and people will be more annoyed because they were on time for their appointments.

Many safety & security devices have proved necessary & successful in some places however, it needs to be highlighted that sometimes measures installed as protection for staff inside can appear as a barrier to the client or customer. Counters, “bandit” screens and other devices can trigger aggression in some people where they are perceived as a barrier or block.

Some examples of good practice in reception areas include

- Keeping people informed of what is going on – go back and tell them if their appointment is going to be delayed
- Consider the use of wider counters so staff cannot be reached over them
- Raising the height of the floor on the staff side of the counter again to protect staff from people reaching over
- Using protective screens
- Providing a panic button or other alarm system – but remember these need to be tested on a regular basis to ensure that they work and that staff responding to them recognise the sound & know what to do
- Using security cameras so reception staff can see all areas from a safe position
- Re-organising the office layout so that the reception area & staff are visible to other staff
- Ensuring reception staff have an escape route should they need it
- Providing entry phone/number pads/entry camera systems
- Locking the access to counter-protected areas
- Reception is notified by other employees of ALL expected visitors
- Intercom links with back-up from nominated staff – or people can listen in if they notice any worrying behaviour

## **2. Advice for reception staff**

Having a reception desk manned by a receptionist who controls access to the building may be a good form of access control but consideration must be given to their personal safety.

Incidents of abuse or violence can be caused simply because the receptionist and the visitor or caller both have personal “baggage” which may come into play when the two interact.

Points to remember when manning the reception desk –

## THE RECEPTIONIST

- may be alone in the building
- may be under pressure to complete some other task which could distract them and make them wrongly assess a situation or not give someone or something their full attention
- may have personal problems they are thinking about instead of having their mind on their work
- may not have been offered the appropriate training to cope with any difficult situations which may arise

## THE CALLER

- May have a personal life history which is unknown to the receptionist but may have a bearing on why/how they have now presented at the reception desk
- May have had a bad journey just getting there
- May have been inappropriately passed on from department to department prior to presenting at the reception desk
- May have had a previous bad experience of your department in the past
- May have mental health problems
- May be on drugs or under the influence of alcohol
- May have unmet needs for which they blame your department

## QUESTIONS TO QUICKLY ASK YOURSELF

- Is this person’s anger or hostility directed at me, the organisation or her/himself?
- Is it a form of distress/cry for help?
- Am I in danger? **If you feel you are – you have the right to leave the scene and get help.**
- Am I the best person to deal with this? **If you feel a colleague could handle the situation more effectively – fetch them to help. This is a professional decision – not a cop out!**

## REMEMBER YOUR CHOICES

- It is OK to ask for help.
- You shouldn't be asked to lie or cover for colleagues who don't want to see people
- You DON'T have to deal with anyone who is under the influence of either drink or drugs
- If you feel threatened you CAN call the police
- Record & Report ALL incidents – however small - highlighted trends or patterns of behaviour can be dealt with under the Protection from Harrassment Law 1997.

#### SOME DO'S.....

- DO have a clear policy worked out beforehand on how to deal with difficult situations
- DO Listen to people
- DO know how to set off any panic alarms which are in place and what to expect if operated
- DO ensure other staff know what to do if an alarm is sounded

#### SOME DON'TS.....

- DON'T talk down or patronize – always treat callers as equally valued human beings who may well have a very good reason for being angry
- DON'T “pass the buck” – the buck stops here – if a caller appears to be in the wrong place – don't just send them on their way – take the time to find out the right place for them.

### 3. How to deal with verbal abuse

#### Telephone Abuse

Guideline for dealing with verbal abuse over the phone

In cases where the caller is being particularly abusive or threatening, staff should be empowered – given permission if you like – to hang-up after warning the caller that this is what will happen if the abuse continues.

The two templates on the next page can be copied or printed off, affixed to some card and kept somewhere handy such as on the employee's document stand, right by the telephone so staff can reach for it if such a call occurs.

The simple act of reaching for the card helps get the receptionist through the initial stress and shock experienced on receipt of such a call, gives them something to focus on and lowers the chance that they may say something abusive in return.

#### ON THE PHONE.....

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO TAKE ABUSE OVER THE TELEPHONE!

IF YOU RECEIVE AN ABUSIVE TELEPHONE CALL – THIS IS WHAT YOU SHOULD DO.....

1. LET THE CALLER SPEAK FOR A WHILE, THEN POLITELY INTERRUPT & EXPLAIN TO THEM THAT YOU ARE NOT PREPARED TO LISTEN TO ABUSIVE OR AGGRESSIVE LANGUAGE AND THAT YOU CANNOT HELP THEM IF THIS CONTINUES.
2. ALLOW THE CALLER TO CONTINUE AND IF THERE IS NO CHANGE, EXPLAIN THE ABOVE AGAIN AND ADD THAT IF THEY CONTINUE YOU WILL END THE CALL.
3. IF STILL NO CHANGE, SAY QUITE CLEARLY THAT YOU ARE NOW GOING TO END THE CONVERSATION AND WILL BE HANGING UP THE RECEIVER.
4. IF STILL NO CHANGE, HANG UP THE RECEIVER & SEEK SUPPORT FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES OR LINE MANAGER.

#### **AT THE RECEPTION.....**

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO DEAL WITH ABUSIVE/AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR!

IF YOU ARE PRESENTED WITH A CALLER WHO IS ABUSIVE/AGGRESSIVE OR UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL OR DRUGS – THIS IS WHAT YOU SHOULD DO.....

1. TELL THE CALLER THAT YOU ARE NOT PREPARED TO ACCEPT ABUSIVE BEHAVIOUR AND THAT YOU CANNOT HELP THEM IF THIS CONTINUES.
2. IF NO CHANGE, REPEAT THE ABOVE AND ADD THAT YOU ARE GOING TO REMOVE YOURSELF FROM THE SITUATION. POLITELY ASK THEM TO LEAVE THE BUILDING AND TO RETURN WHEN THEY CAN BEHAVE MORE CALMLY.
3. IF STILL NO CHANGE, SAY CLEARLY YOU ARE NOW GOING TO LEAVE & LEAVE THE AREA, ENSURING THE DOOR IS LOCKED BEHIND YOU.
4. IF A CALLER HAVING DISPLAYED AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR REFUSES TO LEAVE THE BUILDING, CALL THE POLICE.
5. MAKE USE OF ANY ALARM SYSTEMS IN PLACE TO SUMMON COLLEAGUES.

#### **4. Threats to Staff**

Receiving a personal threat is never a pleasant experience, regardless of whether the threat was provoked or not. Responding improperly to a threat may increase the likelihood that the individual or group making the threat actually carries the threat out. However, regardless of whether the threat comes in the form of a letter, phone call, email or in person, an informed reaction to the situation may help you avoid danger and even possibly diffuse the situation.

### **Verbal threats**

A verbal threat is “an oral communication expressing the intent to rob, assault or in other ways physically or economically harm the person being spoken to”.

In the uk, verbal threats constitute common assault which is both a criminal offence and a civil wrong (i.e a tort that can result in compensation)

### **How to respond to a personal threat**

- Stay calm - responding with arguments, an elevated voice or reciprocal threats will only escalate the situation and increase the possibility that you are actually harmed. Be sure to also avoid personal attacks of any kind.
- Call for emergency help when necessary - it is better to err on the side of caution and contact the police when you feel that the threat is real and imminent. Take the threat seriously and quickly evaluate to determine whether police intervention is necessary.
- Be aware of your surroundings - depending on where the threat is made and what form it comes in, you may need to seek shelter or move to a new location. For instance, a threat made face-to-face may require you to retreat to a neighbour, nearby shop or other organisation to avoid harm.
- Record as much information as you can about the threat whilst it is all still fresh in your mind. This especially applies to phone-based threats. Mark down the date, time, location and what is said. This information maybe needed if the police become involved. Store this information in a safe place that you will be able to easily access.
- Be aware of any witnesses – if possible ask them for their details immediately after any incident and if they would be willing to bear witness.
- Report the incident to your manager(s) and also to your Health & Safety Risk Manager.

### **Written threats**

It is against the law for someone to send a letter conveying a threat. Here is an excerpt of guidance on the matter taken from the Crown Prosecution website:

*“The Malicious Communications Act 1988 section 1, deals with the sending to another of any article which is indecent or grossly offensive, or which conveys a threat, or which is false, provided there is an intent to cause distress or anxiety to the recipient. The offence covers letters, writing of all descriptions, electronic communications, photographs and other images in a material form, tape recordings, films and video recordings. Poison-pen letters are usually covered.*

*Particularly serious examples may justify a more serious charge, e.g. threats to kill.*

*The offence is one of sending, delivering or transmitting, so there is no requirement for the article to reach the intended recipient.”*

### **How to deal with a written threat**

- Whilst it is good practice to inform a high level manager, the intended recipient of the threat (if known) and their direct line manager must also be made aware. This is so that the intended recipient can be vigilant of any unusual incidents, such as someone calling trying to gain additional personal information about them, or someone loitering near the workplace. Also so that any additional security measures can be put in place.
- The manager and intended recipient may want to look at removing any personal details, including photos about the person from the company website and changing their e-mail address, internal extension number, and work mobile number if appropriate.
- Managers may also wish to consult with the intended recipient about whether to inform other staff members, especially any who usually answer the phone or open mail items so they can also be vigilant.
- The letter should be preserved in case it is needed as evidence

### **Preserving letters/documents/paperwork:**

- Keep envelopes as well as contents, if possible, try not to open letters/parcels and just hand to the police.
- If it has been opened handle the item as little as possible and hold by the corners/edges where possible.
- If you feel you have to see the contents, put on gloves so that your fingerprints are not on it.
- Do not let anyone else touch it, even though they may want a look.
- Do not mark, staple, pin or fold the document
- All paperwork should be placed into another larger envelope or paper bag (not plastic) – do NOT write on the larger envelope after the paperwork has been placed in there.

### **For other items which may be received in the post:**

### **Damp/wet items:**

- Place into a polythene bag (freezer bag), seal and immediately put into a freezer.
- Do not use paper bags as they will just go damp and tear.
- If you can't place into a freezer, try to separate the items and lay them out on kitchen paper to air dry naturally.
- Once dry, place into a paper bag/envelope – remember NOT to write on it.
- Do NOT use hair dryers or place into an airing cupboard.

### **Razor blades, hypodermic needles/syringes/other sharp objects should be handled with extreme caution to avoid contamination or injury:**

- Do not try to remove needles from syringes
- Place items into a strong cardboard box or plastic container such as a sandwich box

### **Foodstuffs:**

- Place into a clean plastic container (eg; sandwich box) and freeze.
- If there are items that you really don't want to keep, or can't store like this, then take a photo or video of the item and contents if applicable, with a ruler or tape measure along one or two sides with the measures at right angles.

***NB In all cases keep the packaging, even if you are disposing of the contents.***

### **Electronic e-mail threats**

- Print off everything you can which contains an Isp address.
- Record and/or save any audio.
- Reply to your stalker/bully by telling them to stop 2 or 3 times.
- Do not swear at them in writing or use inflammatory speech.
- Record this.
- Inform them that if this does not stop you are going to the Police.
- If documentation can be produced and a pattern of behaviour evidenced it will be easier for the Police to take action.

## **5. Cash Handling**

Cash Handling is the responsibility of many jobs across the County Council. This can include cashiering, reimbursing Petty Cash and banking monies received by the service.

The following guidance is designed to ensure maximum personal safety when dealing with cash and falls into two key sections:

General guidelines for handling cash inside a building  
Guidelines for dealing with cash outside the building

### **General guidelines for handling cash inside a building**

- Ensure the security of your work environment. It is recognised that different departments are handling cash in different circumstances (eg offices, public libraries, registration offices etc) and each workplace has its own controls in place to ensure that cash is properly accounted for. It is your responsibility to familiarise yourself with these.
- Wherever possible, count money out of sight of the public.
- Be discreet when handling money.
- Keep money under lock and key whenever possible, preferably in a safe where one is available.
- Wherever possible, cash counting should be carried out by 2 members of staff, both of whom should initial the record.
- At the end of the business day, tills should be left empty and with the drawer open so that intruders can see it is empty. This helps prevent the till from being damaged.
- If the till is to be left unattended, all keys must be removed.
- Your personal safety is more important than money – if you are threatened, give the money up!

### **Guidelines for dealing with cash outside the building**

There will be occasions when staff are required to handle money outside their workplace, for example, paying in monies to a local bank, or cashing a Petty Cash cheque.

- Each department will have its own controls in place for the handling of cash in places other than the workplace. It is your responsibility to familiarise yourself with these.
- When carrying cash in a public place, it is important to be discreet. Do not carry cash in a bag or briefcase that is clearly for cash. Use a plain envelope or carrier bag instead.
- Staff should be wearing any clothing that identifies them as carrying cash (eg debt collection staff with branded clothing).
- Clothing should be sensible to ensure it does not hinder a 'hasty getaway' or provide an attacker with a means to grab staff.
- Avoid carrying a handbag. Do not use your handbag for carrying County Council cash.
- Routes and times should be varied, and staff should carry a personal attack alarm. Ensure your route is planned and that colleagues know where you are.
- If staff are using their own vehicles for transporting cash on behalf of the County Council, they must ensure they are adequately insured.
- While at the bank, you can ask for a secure and private area for the transaction to take place in.
- When carrying cash in a public place, remain alert and vigilant.
- If, for any reason, you think you are being followed go to the nearest public building or office to telephone the police and your workplace.
- Any incidents should be reported to allow a review of procedures, including incidents where nothing significant happened but suspicions were aroused.
- If you are threatened in any way, hand over the money – do not resist. Your aim is to get away. Your personal safety is more important.
- The Voiceconnect Loneworker Tracking system is available for use by any member of staff working on their own & would be a useful tool to help reduce the risks to such staff handling monies outside County Council buildings. For more information about this personal safety service, ask your local H&S representative.

## **6. Interview Rooms and the use of Panic Buttons**

## **Interview Rooms**

Thought should already have been given to the suitability of rooms intended for interview use and also to the decoration, taking into account the guidelines for reception points in section 1 of this guide, the layout of the furniture etc. Only have the minimum amount of furniture needed for comfort – and think about anything loose laid around which could be used as a potential weapon.

- There should be a discreet buzzer (panic alarm), or intercom that can be used to summon immediate help if/when needed.
- It is preferable if there is a viewing panel in the door so that other staff members are clearly visible or at least seen to pass by regularly to act as a deterrent.
- If no panel – leave the door open to allow a clear view of – for example – the receptionists desk outside. Ideally – lay the room out so that both interviewer and interviewee have equal access to the door

## **Panic Buttons**

If you install a Panic button you need to also:

- Demonstrate its use to all staff so everyone knows what it sounds like as distinct from other alarms in use – fire etc
- Discuss and agree with staff what should happen if the alarm is activated
- Practice – have panic alarm drills as you do with fire drills.
- Regularly test the alarm to ensure it is working – at least once a week.
- Include the alarm and response procedure in the induction of any new staff

## **7. Interviewing**

- Let someone know that you are going to conduct an interview and which room you are going to be in – enter this information on your whiteboard if the office has one
- If you know that your interviewee has been violent or threatening in the past, find out as much about the incident if possible – it could help you plan your approach
- Secure, hide or remove any items of clothing or jewellery you might be wearing that the interviewee could catch hold of – ties, scarves, necklaces
- Don't walk ahead of the interviewee - show them into the room first and sit nearest the door
- Stay at least a punch distance away
- Never turn your back on the individual – an incident can occur in a split second
- Always use language your interviewee will understand – don't use jargon and don't be condescending or patronizing
- Listen well, hear the person out, and use appropriate body language to show you are listening – nodding, and interjecting encouraging words at appropriate intervals.
- Think about taking notes if appropriate – this will show the interviewee you are taking them seriously.
- Provide paper & pen to allow the interviewee to also take notes if they wish

**AN EXAMPLE OF A PROCEDURE FOR INTERVIEW ROOMS/PANIC BUTTONS  
YOU CAN ADAPT FOR USE IN YOUR BUILDING.....**

## **Interview Room – Procedure for Use and Personal Safety**

Staff taking a customer into the Interview Room must follow this procedure.

### Assisting a Customer in the Interview Room

1. Ensure that you know where the panic button is.
2. Tell a colleague that you are taking a customer into the Interview Room.
3. Direct the customer to the chair furthest from the door and stay nearest to the exit door.
4. Tell a colleague when you come out of the room.
5. If you feel threatened, or the customer becomes abusive, leave the room at once. If you feel it necessary, call the Police.
6. If you are unable to leave the room or need urgent assistance, press the Panic Alarm. A colleague will attend and, if necessary, call the Police.
7. When threatened or abused, complete a Violent Incident Report Form.

### What to do when a Colleague is in the Interview Room

1. Your colleague will notify you when s/he enters the Interview Room with a customer.
2. If your colleague has not returned within 10 minutes, go to the Interview Room and enter to check if all is well. You could do this by telling your colleague there is an urgent phone call for them.
3. At all times, maintain awareness of your colleague in the Interview Room.

### What to do when the Panic Alarm Sounds

1. Immediately, all available staff should go to the Interview Room and assess the situation. If appropriate, open the door; allowing your colleague and the customer to leave the room.
2. When sufficient staff are present to diffuse the situation, the rest may return to their workstations.
3. If necessary, ring the Police.
4. Do not attempt to deal with violent customers yourself. It is better to ring the Police than to take action that could put you and others at risk.
5. Allow your colleague some quiet-time to recover and offer peer counselling.
6. Complete a Violent Incident Report Form.

### Generally

1. At 09:20 every Tuesday, the Officer in Charge tests the Panic Alarm, records it and arranges for any faults to be rectified.
2. **Do not put yourself at risk.** If you feel threatened, or you feel that there is a risk to your colleagues or other customers, then call the Police.
3. Report all incidents. This is an important part of the Council's duty to manage risk and to maintain a safe place of work for staff.

## **8. Security**

### **Identity Cards**

The County Council's ID badges issued to staff allow staff access to their place of work and the following guidance is offered as to their use:

- Staff must take care when using their badge at access points that unauthorised persons do not gain access to premises because our natural automatic behaviour dictates politeness which makes us hold the door open for people.
- Ask to see other people's ID badge before you admit them – if they are genuine they won't mind.
- Similarly – if you see someone in your building not wearing their badge – challenge them in a non-offensive way for example by asking if they are lost or offering to help them find their way around
- When walking to/from work or when out in town at lunchtimes – take your badge off & put it in your pocket or tuck it discreetly inside clothing. Persons intent on breaching security of County Council premises could identify you as a County Council employee & follow you to try to steal your badge or learn your routine – which door you use at what times of the day etc or use your name to attempt gain access or simply to sound plausible if subsequently challenged. This may sound unlikely but it has happened.

### **Control of visitors**

Both local and central government have long understood the crucial importance of regulating access to public buildings. At its simplest level, all County Council buildings should employ a reception-based system whereby all visitors are asked to identify themselves and say who they are there to see, sign in a visitor book, are issued with a badge identifying them as a visitor and their destination within the premises logged.

The most common drawback with such basic systems is that although access is monitored - egress is not – especially in a building with several possible exits, and it becomes impossible to know with certainty who is present in the building at any given time.

Best practice should also include that the staff member they are visiting should come to the reception to escort the visitor to their office or meeting room and most importantly – escort them off the premises again via the reception point so the visitor can sign out.

Other methods which can be employed include:-

A physical barrier - a variety of mechanisms to physically restrict access to a building or location. Typically a magnetic release that opens when a person is authorised.

A door controller - the physical barrier is electronically controlled by a door controller, which contains the electronics and software necessary to authorise the entry of an individual.

Digital key pads - simple keypad systems pre-set with a personal identification number (PIN) allow the door release to operate when the same number is keyed into the terminal.

Utmost care should be taken by authorised staff to ensure that the correct Pin or code is not given out to unauthorised persons, and that visitors to the building are unable to observe the code being entered over staff's shoulders, allowing visitors the possibility of remembering it and using it themselves later.

Access codes should be changed regularly to eventually restrict access where this may have occurred, and also to staff who have moved on etc

### **Building security equipment**

There is a large range of equipment on offer on the market which can be utilised to improve security in problem areas -

CCTV cameras – cctv equipment can be used in both internal and external environments for surveillance to help protect people, property, vehicles and valuables, and is widely considered to be one of the most effective methods of reducing crime. It can provide both an instant reaction to trouble when it occurs and/or a recording to help investigate an incident. Should a crime occur, a cctv recording can provide valuable evidence, improving the likelihood of a conviction.

Careful consideration needs to be given, however, as to the outcome required from their installation – what exactly do you want to achieve? The main consideration needs to be where should the camera feed be monitored - somewhere within the same building or somewhere external or even a professional monitoring service? Do you want other staff to be able to see what is going on in a particular room or site – which staff will be most appropriate to carry out this function – are they too busy to be regularly looking at the screen? Does it need dedicated watchers? What do you want observers to do if they see something untoward taking place? Ensure there are no “blind spots”.

Security alarms – again – consideration should be given to what you want to achieve – an alarm which people ignore because it sounds like just another car alarm is potentially of very little use – does it need to go to the Police?

Lighting – the correct level of lighting - especially external lighting can make a big difference to actual and perceived level of risk – staff will feel quickly feel uneasy in badly lit corridors, entrance ways, and car parks, whereas well lit areas generate confidence and provide fewer hiding places for persons intent on gaining access to a building or on harming people coming and going from it.

For more advice on security - contact your Directorate Health & Safety Risk Manager, or visit NY Police Crime Prevention advice website <http://www.northyorkshire.police.uk/index.aspx?articleid=2474> or contact your local Police Crime Prevention Officer.