



West Lothian  
Council

# **Personal Safety at Work**

## **FAQs for Employees**

Occupational Health & Safety - April 2003  
Revised July 2007  
Revised January 2011  
Revised November 2012  
Revised January 2013

# PERSONAL SAFETY AT WORK

## GUIDE FOR EMPLOYEES

### Introduction

The council recognises that some groups of employees may be exposed to risk of violence at work, particularly those who work in direct contact with the public.

Should you have any specific questions relating to this subject that are not answered in this guide, ask your line manager for a copy of the council's Personal Safety at Work Policy and Procedures.

Many service areas have in place detailed safe working practices and other procedures to prevent and reduce risks arising from exposure to violence at work. Your line manager will advise you what yours are.

### 1. POLICY AIMS

**Q** What are the aims of the policy?

**A** The primary aim is to establish, communicate and promote the council's commitment to employees in respect of personal safety at work.

### 2. DEFINITION/EXAMPLES OF VIOLENCE

**Q** What is 'Violence' at work?

**A** Violence is regarded as any behaviour towards an employee in the course of their work in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted and that has an adverse physical or psychological effect on them. Examples of behaviour that can be regarded as violent can be described in general terms as where employees feel they have been insulted, abused, uncomfortable or threatened specific examples could be:

#### Non-physical Violence

- threatening gestures
- verbal abuse
- harassment in all forms
- racial or sexual abuse
- swearing/shouting
- bullying
- abusive telephone calls
- road rage
- cyberbullying

#### Physical Violence

- kicking
- use of weapons
- spitting
- assault
- punching
- throwing objects
- sexual assault
- nipping/biting/scratching
- slapping

3.

### WHAT THE POLICY COVERS

**Q Does the policy cover/relate to violent incidents at work?**

**A** Yes, it applies to all violent incidents to employees involving members of the public, clients, pupils and tenants and gives advice on lone working.

Where an employee is violent to another employee, the Fair Treatment at Work Policy applies.

**Q Does the policy cover/relate to lone working?**

**A** Yes, the policy applies to people who work without close or direct supervision and who consequently may be exposed to additional risks not otherwise encountered by other workers.

A risk assessment should identify the risk reduction measures that are appropriate in the circumstances and in this regard Managers should take account of different patterns of working (eg Worksmart), the suitability of the employees concerned and the level of support or back up that may be required to allow them to work on their own.

Assessing 'suitability' in this context involves for example, considering the level of experience and competence required to enable an individual to work safely, the demands of the particular work involved, together with any relevant medical conditions or restrictions that may need to be factored into considerations.

4.

### AVOIDING/HANDLING CONFRONTATION

**Q How can I avoid putting myself at unnecessary risk from personal violence at work?**

**A** Taking a few easy precautions can help you reduce the risk. For example:

- When leaving the office let someone know where you are going (with specific addresses) and when you expect to return. If you are detained or your plans change, make sure you let someone know.
- Make sure your vehicle is roadworthy and you have enough fuel for your journey. Know exactly where you are going before you set off (use maps when necessary). Park in well-lit areas where security measures are used and other people are present.
- If you work out of normal hours away from an office location, tell someone where you are going and when you expect to return (e.g. a partner or a work colleague).
- Avoid confrontation - do all you can to defuse a potentially violent situation.

- TRUST your intuition. If you feel scared or uneasy, leave the room straight away. You can use the excuse that you need to get some papers from the car or from another office.
- If you are in a situation where you have concern for someone else's personal safety – **do not put yourself at risk**. Obstructing someone's violent actions may actually put the victim and you at risk. The best course of action may be to withdraw from the situation and seek help.

**Q What should I do when visiting members of the public in their own Home?**

**A** You should find out as much background information as possible before you go, and adopt the following good practice:

- Leave the house if something gives you cause for concern e.g. if the person appears to be under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- Let the other person lead the way into the house;
- When you enter the house, check how the front door locks;
- Study your surroundings. Make sure you have a door at your back, if possible;
- Take only what you need into the house and keep them close at hand;
- Remain alert. Watch for changes in mood, movement or expressions;
- If you feel unhappy about the way an interview is going, terminate it immediately;
- If you are threatened or prevented from leaving, stay as calm as possible and try to control the situation.

5.

## SELF-DEFENCE

**Q How should I handle a situation that seems to be getting out of control?**

**A** You must escape from any conflict situation as soon as possible.

Violent incidents can trigger strong emotions in aggressor and victim, leading to inappropriate or ineffective responses. For example a tendency to freeze or lose control.

The law of self-defence only allows the use of reasonable force, which is difficult to define. Any force required to defend yourself must be reasonable and proportionate to the violence that you are being faced with. There is a very fine line between self-defence and physical assault, and employees must be aware that excessive force could constitute physical assault and have legal repercussions.

In any conflict situation;

- Try to remain calm;
- Try to talk your way out of the situation;
- Avoid standing too close - respect each other's personal body space;
- Be prepared to shout or scream for help;
- Always keep an exit at your back;
- Create distance between yourself and the attacker;
- If you cannot defuse the situation withdraw from it.

6.

### ANALYSIS OF WHAT WENT WRONG

**Q** If preventative action fails and I am subjected to a violent incident what do I do?

**A** Tell your line manager immediately so that he/she can complete a 'violent incident' and 'incident' form. Managers are required to document what happened leading up to the incident, the outcome, action taken by management, and any other recommendations. Managers are also required to undertake a post incident evaluation and make improvements.

Reporting incidents allows managers to identify if the incident could have been prevented and to put steps in place to avoid a similar situation in future. All incident reports are copied to Health and Safety and monitored.

You must also tell your line manager if you have any concerns, or are aware of any hazards that might potentially give rise to a violent incident.

7.

### SUPPORT/COUNSELLING

**Q** What help is available if I am affected by a 'violent incident'?

**A** Support is available in all instances and the level of support will depend on the individual's needs. One person may be happy to talk to a sympathetic colleague or line manager, and depending on the circumstances of the incident, another may require the services of a trained counsellor.

Managers can arrange counselling appointments, or you can self-refer by contacting the Occupational Health Unit. This service is completely confidential and is available for an agreed number of sessions. Your manager will be informed of the take-up of the service NOT the content of the sessions.

8.

### LEGAL ASSISTANCE

**Q If I accidentally injure someone is legal assistance available to me?**

**A** The council covers its employees, and work experience and voluntary workers for claims against them for liability at law while in the pursuit of their council duties, and while acting in the scope of their authority. The cover will not extend to liability directly or indirectly arising from:

- deliberate wrongful acts;
- personal fraud, dishonesty, wilful negligence or criminal offences;
- liability in respect of any surcharges

The cover will also not apply where an individual admits liability or enters into negotiation to settle a claim.

**Remember you have a responsibility to report ALL violent incidents that occur while you are at work and to follow procedures put in place by your service.**

**Your co-operation is vital to ensure that all such occurrences are reported to your line manager. This will allow your manager to look at the events that took place, with a view to preventing or minimising a recurrence.**

## **P      PREPARE YOURSELF**

**Avoid confrontation. Do not meet aggression with aggression.**

Talk your way out of problems: stay calm, speak gently, slowly and clearly. Breathe out slowly to help you relax.

Avoid an aggressive stance or touching someone unnecessarily.

Respect each other's body space – do not stand too close.

## **L      LOOK CONFIDENT**

People who look confident have much less chance of becoming a victim.

## **A      AVOID RISK**

Your aim is to remain safe.

Let someone know where you are going and when you expect to return.

Follow any personal safety procedures your specific work location has.

Avoid taking shortcuts through unlit areas.

## **N      NEVER ASSUME**

Never assume it won't happen to you. No-one is invincible.

Do not ignore your instincts.

