



HOW TO STAY SAFE

A guide for candidates to stay safe from abuse and harassment during the Election Period

July 2025

Introduction

Standing for public office is incredibly rewarding and fulfilling but can come with some challenges.

This guide is to help you think about the things you can do to help keep you safe when you are standing for office and are a candidate in the Council elections.

This guide is for everyone standing in an election in Southland that include those for Environment Southland, Invercargill City, Southland and Gore District Council's as well as the Invercargill and Maitara Licensing Trusts and Gore Health Trust.

These guidelines should be read alongside those prepared by the Government (Security Advice for 2025 Local Government Election Candidates – June 2025).

This Guide has been designed to help you:

- Protect yourself as a candidate ahead of local elections.
- Keep safe online and combat any abuse or harassment.
- Limit public accessibility to your personal information.
- Build a safety plan for public meetings and events.
- Develop strategies for dealing with situations when you're out on personal time.

Please note that the information contained in this guide represents advice, guidance and best practice as provided by the Vote Murihiku Councils. It is not intended to replace any legal advice you receive regarding an active investigation or situation of abuse or harassment.

Keeping Safe Online

As a candidate using websites and social media can be a great way to engage with your community. But it comes with risk and requires careful navigation, remembering that your use of these online tools is guided by the relevant laws.

In this section, you are encouraged to think about:

- How to protect and limit your online personal data
- How to report a privacy breach
- Ways to mitigate harmful social media interaction.

Protecting Your Privacy

Consider risks from exposing private information

Your private information can potentially be exposed via social media accounts, websites, cars with election livery, election advertising and business cards.

This can lead to:

- Phishing attempts (including via text message) to harvest your log-in or banking details.
- Unauthorised access to online platforms or internal systems.
- Online scams delivered by messaging platforms such as Facebook, Instagram or Whatsapp.
- Disclosure of your, or your family's, personal information (including physical addresses).
- Whānau and friends' details being found and revealed.

Remember that information can remain online indefinitely. After an election, neglected accounts can lead to the same risks happening over the long term.

Mitigation: Personal vs public profiles

Public-facing profiles and collateral, both online and offline, are a rich source of data that can be collected for both legitimate and illegitimate purposes. As a public figure, we recommend you:

- Separate your personal accounts from your public ones. A good example is creating a standalone Facebook page specifically for your candidate campaign persona.
- Create a completely separate email account for your public campaign or platform.
- Consider using a new phone number or PO Box, especially if these are linked to a public profile.
- Turn on privacy functions on all your personal accounts to limit who can interact with you online. This includes locking your Facebook and Instagram profiles.
- Ensure your accounts are protected with strong passwords and two-factor authentication.
- Ensure that up-to-date antivirus software is installed on any device used to access your email.
- Do not open attachments or click on links in emails or social media messages from strangers or if you are unsure that the sender is genuine.

What to do if your personal information has been breached

There are several steps you can take if you believe your personal information has been compromised:

- If you believe you have been a victim of a phishing or text scam, you can report an incident to [Cert NZ](#); fill out an online form [here](#).

- If you discover someone is impersonating you online, contact the platform (e.g. [Meta](#) or [Twitter/X](#)) as soon as possible.
- If you believe your privacy has been breached, you should contact the [Privacy Commission](#); phone 0800 803 909 or email enquiries@privacy.org.nz.
- You can also make a privacy complaint online [here](#).
- If you wish to have personal information removed from Google, you can submit a request [here](#).
- If you need to make changes to emails and contact channels, advise your local Deputy Electoral Officer.

Using Social Media and Messaging Apps

As a candidate, it is important that you manage your social media presence in line with expectations and with a mind to how it would look should you be elected.

Minimising harmful social media interaction

- Think before you post. Once online, content is permanent and can be reshared or misinterpreted. Even if you delete a post, someone might already have taken a screenshot. Avoid posting or messaging anything you would not say in a public meeting.
- Stay professional. You are responsible for your posts and interactions. You cannot use Council logos or official symbols on personal election accounts and cannot tag Council posts.
- Engage responsibly. Avoid online arguments, and maintain respectful interactions with the public.
- Do not retaliate. Most bullies are looking for a reaction, so do not give them one.
- Do not keep harmful interactions a secret. Talk to someone you trust, such as a close friend, family member or counsellor, who can give you the help and support you need.
- Document and save. If someone has posted something problematic, you can print or take a screenshot of it in case you need to share it later.
- Prioritise privacy. Protect your personal information, respect the privacy of others, use strong security settings, and report any threats or harassment through the appropriate channels.

Understanding the Harmful Digital Communications Act

The [Harmful Digital Communications Act](#) sets out 10 principles that apply to texts, emails and online posts – what the Act calls ‘digital communications’. NetSafe, as the cyberbullying complaints agency, takes these principles into account when considering a complaint. If complaining to NetSafe does not solve the problem and you decide to take your complaint to the District Court, the Judge will take these principles into account.

The principles say that digital communications that are either sent to you, or are about you, should not do any of the following things:

- give out sensitive personal information about you;
- be threatening, intimidating or menacing;
- be grossly offensive, as judged by any reasonable person in your position;

- be indecent or obscene;
- be used to harass you;
- make false claims about you;
- contain information or material that you had given to someone in confidence;
- encourage other people to send you a message for the purpose of causing you harm;
- encourage you to kill yourself;
- put you down (“denigrate” you) on the basis of your colour, race, ethnic or national origins, religion, gender, sexual orientation or disability.

In addition, the [Harassment Act](#) covers harassment and intimidation across a wide range of different forms, whether it is through texts, emails or online posts, or through face-to-face harassment, stalking or letters. The Act says it applies where someone leaves offensive pictures or text where you will see it, and this specifically includes online material.

The protections in the Harassment Act have sometimes been used in cases of online harassment. The Act allows you to apply to the District Court for a Restraining Order to stop the harassing behaviour.

How to go about Reporting online abuse and harassment

If you have received abuse or harassment online that you feel constitutes a threat to your safety or to your family and friends, then you can choose to escalate this in several ways:

- If you believe content posted about yourself on either Facebook or Instagram has breached Meta’s [Community Standards](#), you can [report the issue](#) to the platform.
- If you wish to make a complaint with regards to content posted on Twitter/X, you can do so [here](#).
- You can report bullying and harassment to Netsafe using this [online form](#) or by emailing help@netsafe.org.nz or texting ‘Netsafe’ to 4282. Netsafe can also provide you with advice if you have received abuse from fake social accounts.
- You can choose to block any phone numbers, email addresses and social media accounts that are being used to send you harmful messages, as well as disabling comments on posts and videos.
- If you have suffered serious emotional distress because of online material, you can apply to the District Court for it to take action to fix the problem, for example, by ordering the material to be taken down or ordering the person responsible to apologise to you. To be able to go to the District Court you have to have first complained to NetSafe and given them a reasonable chance to assess your complaint and decide what to do.
- More information about applying to the District Court can be found [here](#).

Keeping Safe in Public Settings

When you are a candidate, it is important you think about how you keep yourself safe when in a public setting. During the 2022 campaign there were a number of incidents across the country where candidates felt threatened or intimidated during a public event they were attending. This section is to help give you some ideas on what to think about when attending a public event, but it is also good practice to think about.

This is especially important when you are campaigning or taking a strong position on a divisive or controversial issue, or if you are attending a public meeting where a controversial topic is on the agenda.

You may even be at the supermarket or at your child's sporting event; it is possible in any of these settings that you will encounter residents who are upset or angry, which may lead to unwanted confrontations and potentially threatening behaviour.

To prepare yourself for the possibility of this happening, we encourage you to:

- create safety and security plans to keep yourself safe.
- learn about how you can mitigate unwanted behaviour.
- learn about your options if you believe the situation is a genuine threat to your safety.

Staying safe in public and at home

As a candidate you become a public figure. Should you be elected you will remain one.

While a candidate it is your role to engage with your community, but it is equally important to ensure your personal safety.

Having a plan in place can help you manage risks and feel confident in your role; it can also allow you to set boundaries and stay in control.

Staying safe at public meetings and events

Scenario: You are attending a public meeting where a controversial topic, such as a higher rates discussion, is on the agenda. Residents are upset at the impact and burden on them, and tensions in the room are rising.

Best practice is to:

- Have a support plan. If you are attending a public meeting or event where strong opposition is expected, check in with the organisers, ask if there is security, or also engage with other candidates.
- Be aware of tone and body language. Stay calm, neutral, and measured in your responses. Even non-verbal cues (e.g. crossed arms, eye rolling) can escalate tensions.
- While engaging with the public is part of the role, you do not have to respond to every comment or question straight away. Stay professional, de-escalate tense situations, and know when to step away or seek support.
- Do not engage in personal confrontation. If an individual becomes aggressive, deescalate by acknowledging their concern and redirecting to appropriate channels (e.g. "I understand this is an important issue for you, have you submitted feedback through the official consultation process?").

- Know the venue layout. Identify your exits, what security presence there is (if any), and areas where you can safely step away to if needed.

Dealing with situations when you're out on personal time

Scenario: You are approached in a public place, such as a supermarket or sports event, by a resident who is upset about a Council decision and wants to know what you will do about it. They start raising their voice, and bystanders take notice.

Best practice is to:

- Stay calm and polite. Lowering your voice can help diffuse tension. If they escalate, suggest continuing the conversation at another time or in an appropriate forum.
- Be aware of tone and body language. Stay calm, neutral, and measured in your responses.
- Set clear boundaries. "I'm happy to discuss this during working hours. You're welcome to contact me via email so we can set up a time."
- Leave the situation if necessary. If someone becomes aggressive or refuses to respect boundaries, remove yourself from the situation. If you feel unsafe, seek assistance from bystanders or security. Do not place yourself into any situation where you are alone with an aggrieved person without bystanders present.
- Report any incidents. If harassment or threats occur, notify electoral officers and, if necessary, the police.

Avoiding Unwanted Attention at Home

Your home or residence should be a safe place for you and your family. In the unlikely event that your home is placed at risk due to you being a candidate, there are measures you can take to protect yourself from harm.

Best practice is to:

- Limit your personal details available online or through other channels accessible to the public. This includes any candidate promotional materials, business cards, social media and information stored on the electoral roll.
- Consider where you park cars with campaign branding.
- Secure your doors, windows, sheds and garages with good quality locks. Install security stays on windows, especially those on ground level.
- The NZ Police offers a handy [Home Safety Checklist](#).
- Consider installing security cameras, motion detection lighting, home alarms and remote door cameras (e.g. the ring camera).
- Practice good security at your home or residence. Do not answer the door for someone you do not know or do not want in your home. Ask for identification if they say they represent a company. If you are outside for an extended time, e.g. in the garden, lock your front door.
- Do not open up any unexpected or suspicious packages delivered to your home or residence. If you believe they represent a genuine risk to your safety then contact the Police on 111.

- Consider developing a home safety plan for you and your family. This should detail how you and family use security to ensure a safe home environment, and how to respond to any unwanted situations if they occur.
- Report any incidents. If any harassment or threats occur in your home or residence, or if you believe that someone has unlawfully accessed your property, then immediately notify the police on 111. This includes any threatening phone calls or letters you receive.

Sovereign Citizens

Sovereign Citizens or SovCits are a group of people who believe that elected governments do not have legitimate authority and that they are exempt from New Zealand laws. SovCits often use pseudo-legal information rooted in historical laws and principles like the Magna Carta. They deluge councils with paperwork in an attempt to evade legal obligations. Council staff and elected members are experiencing an escalation in extreme demands and threats from SovCits. This has included:

- Refusing to pay rates or fines, or falsely claiming land ownership under 'allodial title'.
- Serving notices, affidavits, and what they call 'self-executing contracts' on councils.
- Harassing councils with vexatious Official Information Act requests.
- Writing threatening letters to elected members, sometimes to their home addresses.
- Attempting to serve fictitious papers to council staff or elected members at their home, workplace or in public.
- Attempting to access council premises using fake ID.

It is important to note that sovereign citizen theories and arguments have no legal basis in New Zealand and are rejected by courts. Anyone claiming to be a sovereign citizen or using pseudo-law to challenge a council charge or process will not remove any obligations to comply with the laws of New Zealand.

All of the advice contained in this guide can be applied to your interactions with SovCits. Additionally, your council should have a security plan in place for your premises. Key things to remember include:

- Be aware of your personal safety wherever you are; this includes your home, place of work or in public.
- You are under no obligation to accept any notices, affidavits or 'self-executing contracts' from SovCits. These are not legal documents and the recipient is under no obligation to receive, read or abide by the contents of them.
- Immediately report any threatening correspondence or confrontations with SovCits to the NZ Police.

Agencies Who Can Help

- **Netsafe NZ** offers a range of resources to help protect you from online harm, and can provide advice on making a complaint and increasing your online security.
- **Elections NZ** offers security advice for candidates during their candidacy period.
- **The NZ Government** offers advice on addressing abuse and harassment.
- **The Human Rights Commission** can also provide support and advice if you have issues relating specifically to your rights.
- The **NZ Police** website contains information about what to do if you are experiencing threats of physical harm or intimidation.
- **Manatū Wāhine /The Ministry for Women** offer advice and a toolkit to help address harm, while developed for women, specifically, much of the information has applicability for all people.

Electoral Officer Contact Details

Electoral Officer for Environment Southland, Invercargill City Council, Gore District Council and Southland District Council:

- Anthony Morton, 0800 666 048, iro@electionz.com

Local – Deputy Electoral Officers:

- **Environment Southland** Paula Burke, 03 211 5115, paula.burke@es.govt.nz
- **Gore District Council** Frances Shepherd, 03 209 0330, elections@goredc.govt.nz
- **Invercargill City Council** Michael Morris, 03 211 8396, michael.morris@icc@govt.nz
- **Southland District Council** Robyn Rout, 027 259 7693, robyn.rout@southlanddc.govt.nz