

PURDAH GUIDANCE ***For*** ***LOCAL COUNCILS***

Council Publicity during the Election Period

Important Guidance on Purdah

There is statutory guidance for local authorities about publicity and information issued during the period just before local elections. The Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity is issued under section 4 of the Local Government Act 1986.

The pre-election period is defined as beginning with the last date for the publication of notice of the election (30 March) to the close of poll at 10:00pm on polling day (7 May), known as the purdah period, the Council, its members and officers should be aware of the special rules designed to ensure the political impartiality of all Council publicity. This will include the obvious forms such as newsletters, magazines, press releases, posters and leaflets issued by the Council. It also includes websites, public meetings, local consultation exercises, exhibitions sponsored by the Council and press advertising, and can include spoken words addressed to the public or broadcast through radio, television or the Internet.

Generally, the Council must avoid:

- proactive publicity of candidates and other politicians involved directly in the elections;
- publicity that deals with controversial issues that could specifically be linked to a relevant election issue (where this cannot be avoided, the publicity should present issues clearly and fairly with opposing points of views represented); and
- publicity that reports views, proposals or recommendations in such a way that it identifies them with individual members or groups of members directly involved in the election.

However the Council can respond to events and legitimate service enquiries provided the answers given are factual and not political. It can also comment on a

relevant issue where there is a genuine need for a member level response to an important event outside of the Council's control.

Generally this means that during the election period the Council will:

- exclude all quotes from and photographs of members directly involved in the election in press releases, publications and other published material;
- refrain from organising photo opportunities or events which could be seen as giving candidates, members or other political office holders directly involved in the election a platform for political comment;
- postpone publications, events or promotions until after the election if proceeding could give the appearance of seeking to affect support for a political party or candidate directly involved in the election;
- not comment on matters of political controversy unless to refrain from comment would be harmful to the Council's best interests;
- avoid references in publications to the period the Administration has been in office or to the Council's future; and
- not undertake any other activity which could be seen as designed to benefit a particular political party or candidate directly involved in the election.

The Code does not affect the ability of local authorities to assist charities and voluntary organisations which need to issue publicity as part of their work, but it requires local authorities, in giving such assistance, to consider the principles on which the Code is based, and to apply them accordingly.

In conclusion

Councils are obviously permitted to serve their electorate in the way they feel best. Common sense and a little caution in ensuring that public funds are not used to seek the promotion of individuals or groups of councillors, is wise advice.