



Pre-election guidance for NHS organisations

NHS Improvement and NHS England

Local elections will take place on 3 May 2018 in a number of areas.

The Department for Communities and Local Government publishes a [list of election cycles](#) by type of local authority in England. You can check on your local authority's website if you are unsure if elections are taking place in your area.

What is the pre-election period?

The pre-election period, also referred to as 'purdah' or 'period of sensitivity', is the period of time immediately before elections or referendums. During this time specific restrictions are placed on the use of public resources and the communication activities of public bodies, civil servants and local government officials. The pre-election period is designed to avoid the actions of public bodies distracting from or having influence on election campaigns.

The pre-election period has implications for all NHS organisations, although it is worth remembering that the NHS should remain politically impartial at all times.

When does it start?

The exact start of the pre-election period in your area is determined by when the local authority in question formally declares it. Typically this will be six weeks before the election, with the latest it could begin being **27 March 2018**.

The convention is that national organisations observe pre-election period rules in the three weeks before the scheduled local elections. Restrictions on NHS Improvement, NHS England and other arm's length bodies (ALBs) therefore begin **12 April 2018**.

Key considerations

You will want to ensure your organisation is seen to behave impartially towards all candidates and political parties, and not seen to be influencing the election and its outcomes, whether inadvertently or intentionally. Remember, not publishing information can be just as influential as publishing it.

The Cabinet Office will issue guidance to civil servants, which will also apply to NHS Improvement, NHS England and other ALBs. The guidance does not formally apply directly to local NHS organisations, but you are strongly encouraged to abide by its general principles. Last year's guidance is [here](#), we expect new guidance will be issued in mid-April and will advise when it is available.

During the pre-election period, there should be:

- no new decisions or announcements of policy or strategy
- no decisions on large and/or contentious procurement contracts
- no participation by NHS representatives in debates and events that may be politically controversial, whether at national or local level.

These restrictions apply in all cases other than where postponement would be detrimental to the effective running of the local NHS, or wasteful of public money.

You should consider:

- **Requests for information:** These should always be handled in an impartial manner so that information is made available to all candidates. Information should be factual and candidates responded to in a timely manner.
- **Briefing MPs and ministers:** These should be handled as per the usual process, ensuring any information shared is factual.
- **Consultations:** No consultations should be launched during the pre-election period unless they are considered essential. Ongoing consultations should continue but should not be promoted. Consultation periods can be extended if it is expected that the pre-election period will impact negatively on the quality of the consultation. Consultation responses should not be published until after 3 May.
- **Media handling:** Avoid proactive media work on issues that may be contentious. Reactive lines should be factual and where possible, in line with previous lines.
- **Events:** Avoid attending events where you may be asked to respond to questions about policy or on matters of public controversy. This may mean withdrawing from previously agreed engagements.
- **Visits from politicians:** The decision to host visits is at your discretion. The same approach must be applied to all visit requests from candidates/parties to avoid any question of bias. This means, if you agree to a visit from a candidate, all other candidates should be invited to visit. Any visits should not interfere with the day to day running of your service and should be mindful of patient privacy and dignity.
- **Social media and web:** Nothing contentious should be posted on your website or social media accounts. Updates/posts, including blogs, should only convey essential factual information.

- **Campaigns:** Do not undertake major publicity campaigns unless time critical (ie a public health emergency).
- **Board meetings:** Board meetings should be confined to discussing matters that need a board decision or require board oversight. Matters of future strategy should be deferred.
- **Appointments of board members and non executive directors:** Appointments can continue as per the usual process unless you are concerned appointments may flare up local political sensitivities, in which case, you may wish to postpone until after the election. Exercise sensitivity over the timing of any announcements.
- **Foundation trust governor elections:** There is nothing to prevent foundation trust governor elections taking place. As above, exercise caution if there are concerns these may become political. Again, any announcements should be carefully considered during this period.
- **Marketing:** Printed materials, such as posters and leaflets, promoting contentious policy or proposed policy should not be given fresh circulation, but can be retained and issued in small numbers on request. Films and other media produced by the NHS, including the NHS logo, should not be made available for use by candidates/parties.
- **Staff activism:** NHS employees are free to undertake political activism in a personal capacity but should not involve their organisation or create the impression of their organisation's involvement.

Communications activities necessary for operational delivery purposes should continue as normal.

Useful documents

[Cabinet Office Guidance from May 2017 local elections](#)
[2010 guidance from Department of Health](#)

Please contact NHS Improvement's Parliamentary team if you are an NHS trust or foundation trust and need any further advice on NHSI.parlybriefing@nhs.net

CCGs and CSUs should contact NHS England's External Communications team on england.externalcomms@nhs.net.