



Pre-election Guidance for NHS Organisations

NHS Improvement and NHS England

Local Elections will take place on 2 May 2019 in 249 local authority areas in England and elections to the European Union (EU) Parliament will take place across the whole of the UK on 23 May. The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government and the Local Government Association publish a [list](#) of which areas will be holding local elections.

What is the pre-election period?

The pre-election period, also referred to as 'purdah' or the '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. The latest the pre-election period could begin in local areas where there are local elections is **26 March 2019**.

The convention observed by national organisations is different to those observed locally. For national organisations the pre-election period begins three weeks before the scheduled local elections. Therefore restrictions on NHS Improvement, NHS England and other arm's length bodies (ALBs) begin on **11 April 2019**.

For elections to the European Parliament, the pre-election period begins in all areas three weeks before the scheduled elections and will therefore start on **2 May 2019** (the day of the local elections).

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 has issued [guidance](#) to civil servants, which also applies 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.

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 should be 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 23 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 you 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 elections. 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 resources

[Cabinet Office Guidance for May 2019 Elections](#)

[Electoral Commission Local Election Updates](#)

[Electoral Commission Twitter](#)

Contact details

Please contact the Parliamentary team if you need any further advice on nhsi.parlybriefing@nhs.net.