

Appendix 4: Communications guidance in the local government pre-election period

Extract from Part 4 of Report of the Controller and Auditor-General, Good Practice for Managing Public Communications by Local Authorities, April 2004, ISBN 0-478-18117-5.

Communications in a pre-election period*

Principle 12 – A local authority must not promote, nor be perceived to promote, the re-election prospects of a sitting member. Therefore, the use of Council resources for reelection purposes is unacceptable and possibly unlawful.

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Promoting the re-election prospects of a sitting Member, directly or indirectly, wittingly or unwittingly, is not part of the proper role of a local authority.

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Council would be directly promoting a Member's re-election prospects if it allowed the member to use Council communications facilities (such as stationery, postage, internet, e-mail, or telephones) explicitly for campaign purposes.

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Other uses of Council communications facilities during a pre-election period may also be unacceptable. For example, allowing Members access to Council resources to communicate with constituents, even in their official capacities as members, could create a perception that the Council is helping sitting Members to promote their re-election prospects over other candidates.

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For this reason, we recommend that mass communications facilities such as –

- Council-funded newsletters to constituents; and
- Mayoral or Members' columns in Council publications –

be suspended during a pre-election period.

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Promoting the re-election prospects of a sitting Member could also raise issues under the Local Electoral Act 2001. For example:

- Local elections must be conducted in accordance with the principles set out in section 4 of the Local Electoral Act – see Appendix 1 on page 27. The principles apply to any decision made by a Council under that Act or any other Act, subject only to the limits of practicality. A breach of the principles can give rise to an “irregularity” which could result in an election result being overturned.**
- The publication, issue, or distribution of information, and the use of electronic communications (including web site and e-mail communication), by a candidate are “electoral activities” to which the rules concerning disclosure of electoral expenses apply.

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“Electoral expenses”*** include:

- the reasonable market value of any materials applied in respect of any electoral activity that are given to the candidate or that are provided to the candidate free of charge or below reasonable market value; and
- the cost of any printing or postage in respect of any electoral activity.

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A Member's use of Council resources for electoral purposes could therefore be an "electoral expense" which the Member would have to declare – unless it could be shown that the communication also related to Council business and was made in the candidate's capacity as a Member.

Principle 13 – A Council's communications policy should also recognise the risk that communications by or about Members, in their capacities as spokespersons for Council, during a pre-election period could result in the Member achieving electoral advantage at ratepayers' expense. The chief executive officer (or his or her delegate) should actively manage the risk in accordance with the relevant electoral law.

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Curtailling all Council communications during a pre-election period is neither practicable nor (as far as mandatory communications, such as those required under the LGA, are concerned) possible. Routine Council business must continue. In particular:

- Some Councils publish their annual reports during the months leading up to an October election, which would include information (including photographs) about sitting Members.
- Council leaders and spokespersons need to continue to communicate matters of Council business to the public.

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However, care must be taken to avoid the perception, and the consequent risk of electoral irregularity, referred to in the commentary to principle 12. Two examples are:

- journalistic use of photographic material or information (see paragraph 4.42 on page 21) that may raise the profile of a Member in the electorate should be discontinued during the pre-election period; and
- access to Council resources for Members to issue media releases, in their capacities as official spokespersons, should be limited to what is strictly necessary to communicate Council business.

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Even if the Council's Communications Policy does not vest the power to authorise Council communications solely in management at normal times, it should do so exclusively during the pre-election period.

* By "pre-election period" we mean the three months before the close of polling day for the purposes of calculating "electoral expenses": see Local Electoral Act 2001, section 104. However, a Council may decide to apply restrictions over a longer period.

** See *Aukuso v Hutt City Council* (District Court, Lower Hutt, MA 88/03, 17 December 2003).

*** Also defined in section 104.