

Pre-election Guidance

Introduction

In the run up to local council elections, it is critical that all members of the Healthwatch network continue to act in a politically neutral way. This report aims to give Trustees the information they need to remain impartial during the pre-election period.

Purpose

Board is asked to note the paper and the implications of the Pre-election period and **to adhere to the key guidance** for from Healthwatch England, which is applicable to staff and Trustees.

Background

In line with guidance from Healthwatch England and our commissioners, Hertfordshire County Council, it is important that our organisation remains politically impartial during the pre-election period. Please note the following background information:

- The 'pre-election period' starts on 21st March and runs until 1st May when the elections take place. Normal business to resume Friday 2nd May
- We are taking the same approach as previous years, based on Healthwatch England guidance and in line with local NHS and Local Government approaches.
- The pre-election period has been factored in to all Healthwatch Hertfordshire operational plans and schedules
- In addition to the wider organisational approach, all Board and Team members individually will need to keep the pre-election period guidance in mind when posting publicly on social media, meeting/interacting with politicians and attending or participating in public events during this time (more detail below)

Proposal

It is recommended that all Trustees read or refresh themselves with the [Healthwatch England guidance](#), which outlines all the key points to be aware of

and is not too lengthy. Please note that this guidance is from last year's pre-election period before the General Election so the dates are wrong but all the guidance still stands. For convenience, the key points are listed below:

What is the 'pre-election period of sensitivity'?

This is the period of time before an election when public authorities are limited in what they can do. This is to ensure that they are not seen to favour one political group or interest or seen to compete with election candidates for public attention.

What this means for you (as an organisation)

- All members of the Healthwatch network continue to act in a politically neutral manner.
- You should not undertake any activity that could call into question your political impartiality or that could give rise to criticism that public resources are being used for political party purposes.
- You will need to carefully consider and make a judgement about the work you have planned for this period. In particular, consider how activity may be perceived in light of campaigning taking place. You should continue to operate as usual and carry out day-to-day activities but be aware of the heightened sensitivity.
- You must not engage in, or advocate for, any party-political activities during this period.
- You should discuss with your board and operational team how you plan to conduct your communications and external engagement during this time. We would also urge your operational team to have a discussion with your local authority commissioner to establish if there will be any specific guidance during this period that the local authority will expect local Healthwatch to comply with.
- There is a shared responsibility across the network to ensure all local Healthwatch act to uphold the reputation of the Healthwatch brand. Therefore, operating in the spirit of the official guidance will help you to avoid compromising your impartiality or reputation.

Implications for staff and board members

- Staff and / or board members may be involved in elections as supporters of political groups or as candidates. In these cases, it is important that they ensure that this is done in their own time and that they do not use any Healthwatch resources to support this activity.
- Healthwatch will also need to ensure that they are not used in a way that might be seen as supporting any campaigning activity.
- If any board members or staff are involved in canvassing, careful consideration should be given about their role in any public-facing activity during this period. You should consider whether a different person can take part in the activity or whether it can be postponed until after the election.

Social media

- As ever, in your capacity as a Healthwatch representative, be careful not to issue any personal opinions on social media platforms, for example Twitter and Facebook, or make any comments from your Healthwatch account that could lead you into a political debate.
- Updating the public with essential factual information may continue but avoid offering additional comment or opinion. Candidates and supporters may ask directly about local Healthwatch's work, and any comment you make should be purely factual rather than expressing an opinion.
- Do not retweet tweets from a political or campaigning organisation that is advocating party political positions, or from a local figure who is standing for election.
- Do not tag Healthwatch Hertfordshire in any posts linked to a political or campaigning organisation that is advocating party political positions, or from a local figure who is standing for election.
- Consider removing any applications that share content automatically to your social media channels during the election period.