



Purdah guidance for local Healthwatch

Maintaining impartiality during the local
government and general election purdah
periods

April 2017



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As we approach the local government, mayoral and general elections, we wanted to share some important points for you, your Board and operational team to consider with regards to purdah. It may also be helpful to briefly update you on how Healthwatch England will be operating during this period.

1.1 Local government/mayoral elections - Thursday 4 May

Local government and mayoral elections will take place on Thursday 4 May.

The areas where local government elections are taking place are outlined [here](#). Combined area mayoral elections are taking place in the following areas:

- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough
- Greater Manchester
- Liverpool City Region
- Tees Valley
- West Midlands
- West of England

Mayoral elections are also taking place in Doncaster and North Tyneside.

Local government and mayoral election purdah runs from 27 March to 4 May.

What this means for you

As we are entering a period of heightened political sensitivity, it is critical that all members of the Healthwatch network continue to act in a politically neutral manner. You will already be aware of the requirements around this, as set out in the NHS Bodies and Local Authorities (Partnerships Arrangements, Care Trusts, Public Health and Local Healthwatch) Regulations 2012¹ and explained in guidance from the Department of Health and LGA².

¹ NHS Bodies and Local Authorities (Partnerships Arrangements, Care Trusts, Public Health and Local Healthwatch) Regulations 2012, *Part 6: Local Healthwatch*, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2012/3094/part/6/made>

² Department of Health, *Local Healthwatch Regulations Explained*, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130805112926/http://healthandcare.dh.gov.uk/local-healthwatch-regulations-explained/>

It is expected that you will continue to operate as usual and carry out day-to-day activities, for example, publishing Enter and View reports and holding public engagements events. However, you must ensure not to engage in, or advocate for, any party political activities during purdah. We would encourage you to 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 purdah that the local authority will expect local Healthwatch to comply with. This will be particularly important in areas where elections will be taking place, as these local authorities may have issued specific guidance.

Given the collective nature of the network, there is a shared responsibility to ensure all local Healthwatch act to uphold the reputation of the Healthwatch brand. Therefore, operating in the spirit of the official purdah guidance will help you to avoid compromising your impartiality or reputation.

1.2 General Election - Thursday 8 June

The general election will take place on Thursday 8 June. Therefore, in accordance with the guidance set out in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, there will be a period of purdah, beginning on 22 April.

What this means for you

The period in the run-up to the general election will be highly sensitive from a political perspective. Therefore, it is critical that members of the Healthwatch network continue to act in a politically neutral manner.

As with local elections, it is expected that you will continue to operate as usual and carry out day-to-day activities, for example, publishing Enter and View reports and holding public engagements events. However, you must ensure not to engage in, or advocate for, any political party during this time. Again, we would encourage you to discuss with your Board and operational team how you plan to conduct your communications and external engagement during general election purdah.



1.3 What you should be aware of

For both local elections and the general election, you will want to give particular consideration to the following issues. If you have any queries on these or any other issues during the purdah period, please do contact us for further support.

- **Not favouring any party, candidate or grouping:** local Healthwatch must be impartial and be careful not to give, or to be perceived to give, greater prominence in any activities or events to any individual party or prospective local/ general election candidate. We would therefore advise you to fully consider the risks and benefits of inviting candidates to any local events or providing anyone with a potential political platform under the banner of Healthwatch.
- **Declaration of political activities:** if anyone directly involved in local Healthwatch delivery is standing for election, it is essential that they declare their interest and do not make public statements on behalf of Healthwatch or use Healthwatch resources. We suggest you consult our conflict of interest guidelines which provide more information.
- **Publishing new reports:** we would expect you to continue to publish reports on your Enter and View activities. However, it will be important to bear in mind that material which would normally be considered objective and impartial may well be seen as political and attract criticism in these highly sensitive periods.

Therefore, please do think very carefully ahead of publishing a report and we would ask that you exercise your full judgement to determine if it is the most appropriate time to release the report.

- **Media enquiries:** at this very sensitive time it is possible for comment made to the media to be taken out of context or misinterpreted and used in a way which could call into question your political impartiality or that of your local Healthwatch.

If you are contacted by a journalist during purdah, we advise that you direct them to material that is already in the public domain, for example, previous statements that you have released on issues. You should avoid offering additional comment or opinion and if a journalist asks questions directly about Healthwatch any comment you make should be purely factual.

If you are being pushed for comment by a journalist and are keen to maintain relationships, our media team suggests directing requests to local voluntary groups who share similar views on the issue.

- **Social media:** particular care should be paid to social media, specifically to ensure that you 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. You may also consider removing twitter applications that share content automatically during the election period.

As ever, in your capacity as a Healthwatch representative, be careful not to issue any personal opinions on Twitter and Facebook or issue any tweets from your Healthwatch account that could lead you into a political debate. As with the media enquiries section above, avoid offering additional comment or opinion. If asked directly about Healthwatch any comment you make should be purely factual.

- **Speeches and attendance at events:** it is especially important that you do not become involved in, or comment on, issues which relate to the election campaigns, especially party political issues. In your capacity as a representative of local Healthwatch, it will not be appropriate to take part in speaking engagements and events where you will be asked to comment on or advocate for a particular party position.

These are just a few examples of some activities that you and your team should bear in mind during purdah. It is important for you to consider the implications and risks around any activities you are planning to develop. If you use external PR agencies, please also make them aware of the above guidance.

Most of all, it is vitally important that you consider how these activities may be perceived, and not just your intention behind them.

1.4 Healthwatch England activity during purdah

Healthwatch England will be subject to the [guidance](#) issued by the Cabinet Office for both local elections and general election, which will apply to all Government departments and arms' length bodies.

During this period we will continue with our day-to-day business of supporting the local Healthwatch network and taking forward our projects. However, in line with Cabinet Office guidance, we will be reducing our public-facing activities and carefully considering how the work we carry out may be perceived, particularly in relation to local Healthwatch in areas where there are elections taking place.

We hope this information is useful and provides you, your Board and operational team with some principles about conducting communications and external engagement activity during this time.



Should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact your Healthwatch England Engagement team Lead.