

# LOCAL AUTHORITY ELECTIONS DEALING WITH MEDIA

## 1 PUBLICISING SITTING MEMBERS

In the lead up period to an election (three months prior to polling day) the local authority needs to carefully consider what publicity and media profile it gives sitting members, and whether continuing regular publicity programmes could be perceived as giving an unfair electoral advantage over other candidates. For example, many local authorities will halt councillors' comment columns in local authority publications and constituency/ward newsletters during the lead-up to an election, as recommended by the Controller and Auditor General.

Councils should familiarise themselves with the report by the Controller and Auditor-General called: 'Good Practice for Managing Public Communications by Local Authorities (April 2004)' – especially section 4, Communications in a pre-election period.

This includes 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 Local authority resources for re-election purposes is unacceptable and possibly unlawful.***

And also 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.***

## 2 INFORMING THE ELECTORATE

In some areas there may be issues or voting practices which the wider community needs information on ahead of the elections, so as to be better equipped to make their preferences. This may be the case if a decision has been taken to operate elections for the first time under the STV system, or if a referendum is to take place with the election.

The local authority should consider whether an advance programme of information and publicity is required in these circumstances to help educate voters.

The local media can play an important role in the process of informing the electorate. However, be prepared for the possibility, in the case of a referendum, for some media to choose to take a particular position on the issue and campaign accordingly.

## 3 MEDIA INVOLVEMENT IN ELECTIONS

The media can play an important and useful role as a conduit for communicating election information to residents and ratepayers.

The council's election spokesperson – often the electoral officer – should be identified early and this information conveyed to interested parties (staff, media, etc).

- The spokesperson should have the appropriate skills for dealing with media enquiries, handling interviews etc. Assistance from the council's media advisor/s should be employed and coaching undertaken if necessary.
- Local media are likely to have an interest in the entire election process and the electoral officer should attempt to keep them fully advised at all times.
- A list of specific media contacts (email and/or fax addresses) for this purpose should be compiled.
- Proactively releasing regular information about the elections should help reduce media demands on the electoral officer.
- Consider holding a media conference well in advance to ensure media have a sound understanding of what's happening, the processes, the issues, their own responsibilities, and what to expect from the electoral officer.
- All information released should also be included on the council's web site, and made available to staff.

## 4 KEY STAGES OF MEDIA INTEREST

Key milestones the media will likely have an interest in include:

- **Representation review process:** When the local authority carries out community consultation for its representation review and considers elements such as:
  - Number of councillors
  - Wards (if any)
  - Community boards, etc.
- **Prior to nominations being called:** media may be interested in
  - Issues (what people are voting on)
  - Process and timing
  - Candidates' deposits, spending allowances
  - Candidate eligibility,
  - Role responsibilities, remuneration and time commitments etc.

This potentially provides an opportunity to create awareness about the forthcoming election and to encourage nominations. Councils may embark on their own pre-election publicity programme, including taking out advertising, producing newsletters etc.

- **When nominations open:** there is likely to be some media interest at the commencement of, and during, this period. Councils may consider releasing nominations as they come to hand, or on a weekly basis, and also running them on the web site. Interest in mayoral nominations is likely to be strongest.
- **When nominations close:** Media will usually expect a full list of nominations as soon as nominations close. Councils should have this information compiled in advance and ready to add last minute nomination information. They may also consider releasing the candidates' own supplied personal profiles at that time. Electoral officers may be asked by local media to provide comparative information on previous election/s in terms of number of candidates for the various issues (mayorality, wards, community boards etc).
- **When voting papers are despatched:** there may be some interest from media when voting papers start being distributed. This often provides a useful photo opportunity with large piles of voting papers being prepared, posties delivering them etc.
- **During voting period:** media may be interested in how the level of voting is progressing

– how many votes cast to date, trends in numbers compared to previous years etc. They may also monitor candidates' compliance in removing billboards before polling day, so it's important to ensure candidates are aware of this requirement.

- **Polling day:** ahead of polling day prepare a template for results and compile a comprehensive list of email/fax addresses of media (including national media) that you need to send results to. Give them a conservative estimate as to when to expect results on the day. If there is some delay in releasing results, send out a message with an update of when you now expect to have results available. Publish simultaneously on the local authority web site.
- **Post polling day:** media may be interested in the percentage of eligible voters who exercised their votes (compared to previous years), and timing for release of final results, recount applications etc.

## 5 CONTINGENCY PLANNING

There is the possibility of a major problem occurring that precludes the release of results at the anticipated time on polling day. Therefore it is important to have a contingency plan in place, and this could include these 10 steps:

- 1 Identifying the problem and establishing the facts. Obtaining as much information as possible.
- 2 Calling a Contingency Action Team together (this will depend on whether vote processing is carried out in-house. The Team may comprise some or all of the following: electoral officer, deputy electoral officer, communications advisor, legal advisor, IT advisor, other technical experts, minute secretary, etc. Brief the team. Core team members should be identified in advance and be readily contactable in case needed).
- 3 Trying to predict the course of events and the various potential scenarios.
- 4 Identifying the desired outcome and agreeing on action necessary to achieve that end result. Considering fallback positions. Recording decisions and action.
- 5 Appointing a sole spokesperson, and a backup spokesperson. Identifying that spokesperson to interested parties (media etc).
- 6 Ensuring there is a private and secure venue for the Contingency Action Team to discuss and handle the problem (do not allow access to anyone else – especially media, elected members, candidates etc).
- 7 Preparing a statement at the earliest possible stage on what has happened, why, and when you expect it to be rectified - apologising for delay if necessary. Sending out the statement to media and publishing it on the web site. (Consider sending out a 'holding' statement in the meantime if more time is needed).
- 8 Advising when the next statement is expected to be made.
- 9 After the release of election results, reviewing the problem, keeping a record of what happened and why, and assessing how well it was handled. Making recommendations for the future.
- 10 Releasing information on the problem, and advising what is in place to avoid a future re-occurrence.

## 6 CONTACT WITH MEDIA

The media are invariably under instruction to secure news that they believe is relevant and of interest to their readers. Their view of what is newsworthy may differ to that of councils. Remember conflict and controversy will always be newsworthy to media.

Electoral officers may consider the following to assist in ensuring effective communication and professional relationships exist with reporters:

- Identify who are your key media contacts in advance and compile their contact details. Provide access and issue information to them equally.
- Give some priority to taking calls from reporters where possible, and return messages from reporters promptly. Remember, a story is still likely to run with or without your response – and it never looks good if there is a comment in the story to the effect that you “declined to comment.” It is important to ensure your organisation’s perspective of the issue is included in the story.
- Do not respond ‘off the cuff’ to media queries if you are not fully prepared and if you do not have all the information readily available at hand. Find out about reporters’ deadlines and call back with information within that timeframe.
- If the media enquiry suggests some controversy, you may choose to ‘buy time’ with the reporter and seek the communications advisor’s assistance first, before responding later. If the issue is very contentious consider preparing a carefully worded written statement first.
- Jot down a few key points you want to make during an interview and ensure you address those, regardless of the questions from reporters. Repeat and reinforce those points.
- Stick to the point and say only what you will be happy hearing broadcast or seeing printed in tomorrow’s newspaper.
- Stick to facts and avoid giving opinions.
- Do not talk “off the record”. Treat all conversations with reporters as ‘on the record’ and ‘live’, and be careful with radio/TV reporters who may use any part of their conversation with you for broadcast.
- Never say “no comment” – if you can’t answer a question explain why you can’t respond at that time.