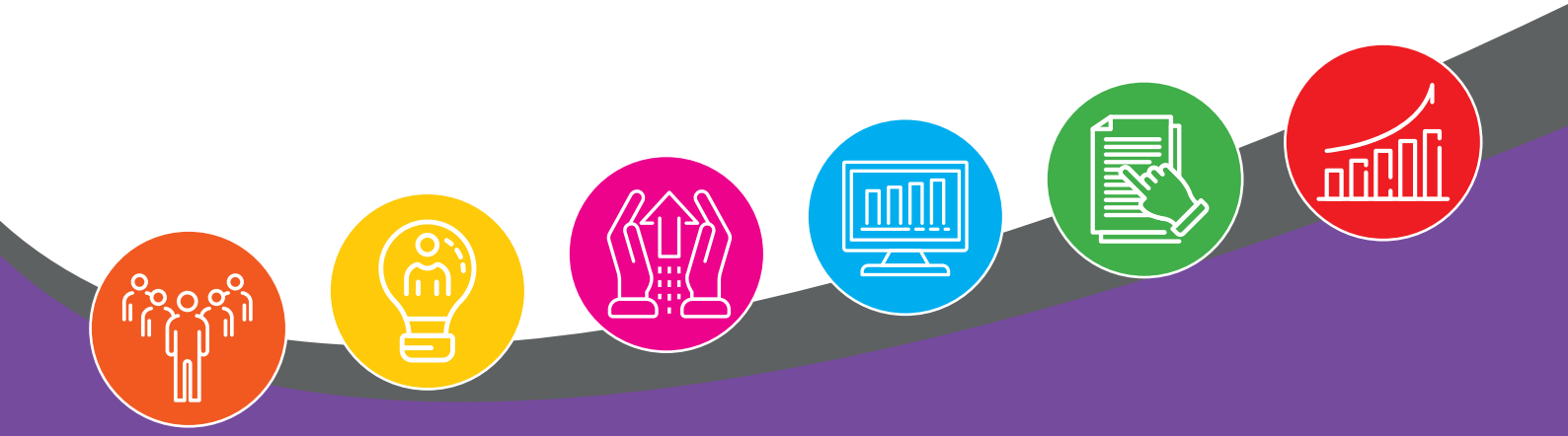
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NI Assembly and Local Government Elections

6 May 2027



NILGA Advisory Note

What is the 'Pre-election Period of Heightened Political Sensitivity'?

Formerly referred to as 'Purdah', this describes the period immediately before elections or referendums when restrictions on communications activity are in place.

The period of heightened sensitivity in Northern Ireland

On Thursday 6 May 2027, combined Northern Ireland Assembly and Local Government elections are scheduled to take place. This creates a wider combined electoral environment than in 2023. Councils should therefore consider whether any activity, publicity, event, visit, use of facilities or use of resources could reasonably be seen as advantaging or disadvantaging a party, candidate or campaign in either the Assembly election or the local government election.

The Assembly election and council elections will be taking place on the same day, with different but overlapping electoral geographies. Councils should be mindful that activity which may appear routine from a council perspective could still be viewed through the lens of the wider Assembly campaign, particularly where Ministers, MLAs, Assembly candidates, party leaders or high-profile political figures are involved.

There is currently no legislation in Northern Ireland like the English Local Government Act 1986, formally governing publicity and council activity during the pre-election period for local government elections. Similarly, there is no directly comparable, formal Code of Practice for councils to the Code of Practice published by the English Department of Communities and Local Government in 2011.

This guidance draws on established UK good practice on pre-election sensitivity, including principles reflected in local authority publicity guidance in England, Scotland and Wales. The legal framework differs between jurisdictions, and Northern Ireland councils should take their own legal and governance advice. However, the common principles are consistent: councils should remain politically neutral, avoid the use of public resources for electoral advantage, continue necessary business, and take particular care with publicity, events, facilities, officer support and candidate access during the pre-election period.

NILGA has received several approaches for relevant advice and is keen to ensure that there is guidance to support a proportionate, consistent and good-practice approach by councils and the wider public sector in Northern Ireland in relation to the period of heightened sensitivity prior to the combined elections.

This informal, without-prejudice advice is for councillors, officers and partner organisations. It should be read with guidance from the **Electoral Office for Northern Ireland**, **Electoral Commission**, relevant Departments, Returning Officers, council Chief Executives, Monitoring Officers and legal advisers, together with local council policies.

Quick guide: combined Assembly and Local Government Elections 2027

A practical summary of the main principles follows.

- **Business continues:** councils should continue ordinary statutory, regulatory, service delivery, planning, licensing, safeguarding and emergency functions.
- **Check the start date:** councils should confirm the formal start date for the period of heightened sensitivity once the election timetable and official guidance are issued. As a working assumption, heightened sensitivity should be expected to apply from the publication of the notice of election or from any earlier date specified in official guidance.
- **Apply the combined-poll test:** could the activity reasonably be seen as advantaging or disadvantaging a party, candidate or campaign in either the Assembly election or the local government election?
- **Be careful with dual-status councillors:** sitting councillors who are Assembly candidates can continue normal council duties, but council resources, imagery, officer support, civic platforms or committee roles must not support, or appear to support, their Assembly campaign.
- **Avoid campaignable publicity:** take particular care with photographs, video, launches, speeches, social media amplification, candidate-focused media, branded graphics and public events.
- **Treat candidates consistently:** especially around access to premises, briefings, facilities, photographs, media support, council information and officer assistance.
- **Use officer-led communication where appropriate:** particularly where a councillor, Mayor, Chairperson, committee chair or portfolio lead is also a candidate.
- **Handle Ministerial visits carefully:** necessary urgent, operational or statutory Ministerial visits may proceed, but discretionary announcements, launches or associated publicity should be avoided where they could confer electoral advantage.
- **Remember partnerships and jointly branded work:** risks can arise where council funding, staff, branding, premises or communications channels are involved.
- **Take advice early:** seek legal, governance, electoral, communications or compliance advice where activity is novel, high-profile, politically sensitive, time-critical or capable of being perceived as election-related.

It is important to note that good pre-election practice extends beyond restrictions on publicity.

Use of council facilities and resources; application of and adherence to the members' code of conduct; developing new policies; holding events, launches or visits; and publicity involving elected members, MLAs, Ministers, candidates or political parties should all be carefully considered during the period of heightened sensitivity.

When do we need to start considering pre-election sensitivities?

Councils should confirm the formal start date when the election timetable and official guidance are issued. Until then, assume heightened sensitivity begins with publication of the notice of election, or on any earlier date specified officially.

Guidance applying to Ministers, departments or civil servants may also affect the timing and tone of intergovernmental announcements, visits, joint events and council publicity.

What does this mean in practice?

External communication does ***not*** have to stop. Ordinary council functions should continue, subject to proportionate safeguards for councillors and officers.

A decision made during this period is not automatically inappropriate or unlawful. It should be taken on its merits through a fair process, while its timing, publicity and use of council resources are assessed for possible electoral effect.

Core test: could a reasonable person conclude that public money or council activity was being used to influence either election or advantage or disadvantage a party, candidate or campaign?

Sitting councillors who are Assembly candidates may continue normal council duties, but council resources, staff support, civic or committee roles, media opportunities, photographs, social channels and premises must not support, or appear to support, their campaigns.

Where such a candidate holds a prominent council role, consider officer-led communication or an alternative civic or corporate spokesperson.

When making a decision, one should consider the following:

What you are strongly recommended not to do

- Publish material on politically controversial matters.
- Name or feature politicians, Ministers, MLAs, councillors, candidates, parties or groups unless there is a clear corporate, statutory or emergency need and the wording is factual, necessary and neutral.
- Arrange proactive media, launches, visits, photo opportunities or events that could be perceived as supporting a candidate, party or campaign.
- Issue or amplify photographs, videos or other campaignable visual material featuring political figures unless clearly necessary and non-political.
- Supply council images or materials without confirming their intended use and preventing campaign use.
- Host third-party blogs or communications that do not comply with these principles.
- Use council money, staff, premises or other resources to support party-political visits.

What you need to think carefully about

You should think carefully before you:

- Continue an existing council campaign only if it is necessary, non-controversial and unlikely to influence either election; otherwise stop or defer it.
- Avoid new consultations or publication of sensitive findings unless required by law or operational necessity.

What you can do

- Continue normal statutory, regulatory, planning, licensing, safeguarding, emergency and service-delivery work.
- Publish necessary, factual and politically neutral information, including election information.
- Correct misleading or extreme information factually and impartially.
- Use lead officers or other non-political spokespersons where appropriate.
- Use a civic office holder for an essential corporate response, such as an emergency, provided the response is necessary, neutral and proportionate; for serious matters, consider an agreed cross-party response.
- Seek legal, governance, communications or compliance advice when in doubt.

All decisions should be fair, reasonable, proportionate and politically neutral.

Treat candidates consistently. Sitting councillors must not gain an electoral advantage through council facilities, briefings, events, imagery, media support or officer assistance unavailable on an equivalent, neutral basis to others.

Advertising

Paid advertising must comply with the Advertising Standards Authority Codes and applicable law. It must not seek to influence voters; references to government policies or proposals must be balanced and accurate.

Requests for Information

Handle correspondence and Freedom of Information requests normally and promptly. Apply the same standards to all parties, candidates and independents, recognising that otherwise routine information may receive greater scrutiny during an election.

Invitations and outside visits

Follow normal procedures for invitations and visits. Officers should not participate in party-political events. Attendance involving political figures should be necessary for corporate business and, where possible, proceed without campaign branding, messaging, photographs, speeches or council amplification.

Transport

Council vehicles and transport resources must not be used for party-political purposes.

Social Media Tips

- Apply heightened-sensitivity principles to every council-operated social-media account.
- Consider publishing a neutral explanation of the council's approach during the pre-election period.
- Do not repost, share, tag or amplify political opinion, campaigning, constituency activity or election material, including content from sitting councillors who are candidates.
- Do not post or share content on politically controversial matters.
- Monitor pages and moderate politically controversial content in line with council policy.
- Avoid significant media activity, launches, Ministerial visits, civic events or photo opportunities unless they are necessary, proportionate, politically neutral and unlikely reasonably to be perceived as influencing either election.
- Content about a Mayor or Chairperson may be shared only when non-political, necessary and proportionate.
- Where practicable, restrict reuse of political images and video, and do not provide council assets for campaigning.
- Use political comments or imagery only exceptionally and with communications, compliance or legal approval.
- Apply the same principles to council-supported partnership accounts; if control transfers, ensure council staff and resources are not used for political content.
- Assess council-funded programmes, partnerships and jointly branded initiatives for publicity and resource risks.
- Take care with archived images, live streams, short-form video, tags, comments, paid promotion and partner reposting.
- Councils should not provide photographs, video, branding, officer-prepared material, or other council resources for use on personal or campaign accounts where this could confer an electoral advantage.

Seven Golden Rules

1. Do not publicise politically controversial matters or anything reasonably seen as influencing either election.
2. Do not name politicians, Ministers, MLAs, councillors, candidates or parties in press releases unless required for a valid corporate, statutory or emergency reason and the wording is factual, necessary and politically neutral.
3. Avoid significant media activity, launches, ministerial visits, civic events or photo opportunities unless scheduled before the election period and still necessary, proportionate and politically neutral.
4. Do not issue or amplify photographs, videos or other campaignable visual content featuring candidates in either election.
5. Before supplying council photographs or materials, confirm their intended use and impose appropriate restrictions.
6. Material featuring the Mayor or Chairperson may be issued when it is non-political, proportionate and reasonable.
7. If the Mayor, Chairperson or another civic office holder is an Assembly candidate, their civic role may continue, but communications should cover only necessary, factual and non-political business. Normally avoid discretionary photo opportunities, speeches, launches and campaignable imagery.

Frequently Asked Questions

Does this advice apply to councillors who are not running for election? Yes. All councillors must observe these principles, whether or not they are standing, including those supporting candidates or wider party campaigns.

What if a sitting councillor is also standing for the Assembly? Normal duties, meetings and representation may continue, but council staff, premises, branding, communications, facilities and civic or committee roles must not support, or appear to support, the campaign. Legitimate casework and public meetings must remain clearly separate from Assembly campaigning.

Can council officers get involved in campaigning in their own time? Officers in politically restricted posts, or working on the elections, should not campaign or canvass. All officers should follow their employment code and political-activity policies.

Do the restrictions apply to officers who are members of a trade union? Trade unions are not covered in the same way, but individual officers remain subject to council policies and heightened-sensitivity principles.

Can council press offices still put out press releases ahead of the election? Yes. Press statements may communicate official decisions and factual public information, but should avoid controversial issues or attributing views and proposals to individual councillors or groups.

Can a council put out a consultation, for example about changes to leisure provision, during the pre-election period? Only with care. Avoid consultations or findings that could be politically sensitive or controversial, unless publication is required or operationally necessary.

Can we use the chair of a council-commissioned review, who is up for election, as spokesperson for the report? Preferably delay publication. If publication is necessary, use a non-political spokesperson.

Can we host a photo call for a council committee chairperson or other leading councillor to open a new council facility (such as a play park) during the pre-election period? Generally no. If opening cannot reasonably be postponed without public harm or material loss, use a non-political spokesperson and avoid campaignable publicity.

Do restrictions apply to council notice boards? Election and voter-registration information may be displayed. Do not display wider political material, including trade-union publicity on political issues.

Can councillors issue their own press releases or talk to the media? Yes, but they must not use council resources and must observe the Code of Conduct.

Can councillors write letters 'for publication' to their local newspaper? Yes, without council staff or other council resources.

Can councillors still post or blog? Yes, using personal or campaign resources rather than council accounts, email, telephones or other assets.

Can councillors who are up for election refer to themselves as councillors in their public statements? Yes. They remain councillors until their term ends.

Can candidates request to visit council establishments? Use an agreed corporate process and consistent criteria for all candidates and parties. Any access should have a clear non-campaign purpose, avoid endorsement and campaignable imagery, and protect officers from party-political involvement.

Can candidates speak/canvass at a student union (which is a registered charity) during the pre-election period? Yes, provided the activity is neither funded nor arranged by a council.

Can the council still publish its newsletter/magazine during the pre-election period? Yes, if publication is part of ordinary business and complies with all other guidance.

What is different because two elections are taking place on the same day? Assess the effect of activity across both contests. Apparently routine council business may affect Assembly candidates, constituencies, Ministers, MLAs or wider party campaigns. Apply the core test of whether a reasonable person could perceive an advantage or disadvantage in either election.

office@nilga.org

www.nilga.org

Northern Ireland Local Government Association

@NI_LGA

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