



# Council communications during the 2022 pre-election period

Polling day for local elections is Saturday 8 October 2022. From 8 July, candidates for election can promote their candidacy. This includes currently elected members (sitting candidates) who have decided to stand for re-election.

Elected members can govern and make decisions during this period, but their councils have to remain politically neutral. To ensure that sitting candidates do not gain an unfair advantage over non-sitting candidates, councils need to carefully manage communications during the pre-election period.

It is not the role of councils to promote the re-election prospects of sitting candidates. The use of council resources, including staff time and equipment (such as photocopiers or council-provided phones and laptops) for re-election purposes is unacceptable.

Council staff need to take particular care to make sure that council communications are not used, or appear to be used, for political purposes. If ratepayer funds are used, or appear to be used, to promote electioneering then public trust and confidence in the outcome of elections will be put at risk. The reputation of the council could be damaged.

The line between legitimate council communications and campaigning can be easily crossed, sometimes unintentionally. If in doubt, it's best to take a precautionary approach – it is better to be safe than sorry.

Here are some of the main things councils should watch out for when making decisions about communication during this pre-election period.

**Media releases:** Sitting candidates will often act as spokespeople for the council and the publicity provided by such activities can be seen as an opportunity to promote their re-election. Elected members need to continue to fulfil their roles and responsibilities, including communicating matters of council business to the public, but media releases should be limited to what is strictly necessary to communicate that business. Council managers should oversee public communications during the pre-election period to manage misperceptions and risks to the council.



**Media interviews:** Media interviews about council business often contain unscripted elements where it's easy for politicians to slip into campaign mode unintentionally. If the risks can't be managed it will be less risky for the chief executive or the council communications manager to act as a spokesperson for any media about council business.

**Images or information:** Councils should not use images that raise the profile of any elected members in communications to the public during the pre-election period. Examples include billboards, promotional material for council facilities, and newsletters that feature such images.

**Email:** Using the council's email facilities to communicate with constituents could create a perception that the council is supporting sitting candidates. It doesn't mean that sitting candidates cannot use the council's email for normal activities, but they need to take care because the boundaries between answering a ratepayer query and campaigning can be difficult to navigate.

It's legitimate for sitting candidates to use a council email account to defend a council decision or action, or even to explain their own position on a decision where that position is different from that of other elected members. But doing the latter without slipping into campaign mode can be difficult during the pre-election period.

**Social media:** Council social media accounts should not be used by sitting candidates for electioneering, or appear to be used as such. Sitting candidates need to make sure that any social media accounts they use for electioneering are clearly not linked to the council, and do not give the impression that they are linked.

**Annual reports:** Some councils adopt their annual reports in August or September and make them publicly available soon after, along with a summary annual report. This makes them available during the pre-election period. To avoid concerns that annual reports are being used as an advertising opportunity for sitting candidates, care should be taken with information (including photographs) about any elected members in annual reports and summaries.

## Councils should draft and implement a communication protocol

We recommend that councils draft and implement a communication protocol for the pre-election period. This should set out how the council intends to manage communications during the pre-election period. The communication protocol should be based on the following principles – that information is:

- **Timely:** Information used during the pre-election period should relate to events before, or as soon as practicable after, an event or decision.
- **Accurate:** Information should be based on verifiable facts.
- **Complete:** All the necessary information is included so that readers can form a balanced view.
- **Fair:** information should be presented in an objective, unbiased, and equitable way.
- **Neutral:** The council's collective position is expressed, not that of individual elected members.

Taituarā and Local Government New Zealand have published [guidance setting out principles and guidelines for councils and their elected members to apply](#) when preparing and delivering communications during the pre-election period.