



Election protocols for Wanganui District Council staff

Election day for the local authority triennial elections is Saturday, 9 October 2010. These protocols are to guide staff on interactions with elected members and the public in the pre-election period (the three months before the election and including polling day). For this triennial election, this council will define the pre-election period as beginning on 1 July 2010.

Communications in a pre-election period

In April 2004 the Controller and Auditor-General published a “*Good Practice for Managing Public Communications by Local Authorities*” which includes guidelines on communications in a pre-election period.

The relevant principles are:

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 Council resources for re-election purposes is unacceptable and possibly unlawful.

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.

What this means for council staff

Wanganui District Council staff should remain politically neutral at all times in their dealings with elected members and the public in general. This is even more important in the pre-election period.

It is not appropriate or acceptable for staff to align themselves to, or demonstrably support, a candidate, whether they are a current or aspiring elected member. This could result in allegations of bias, potentially causing serious problems for the individual employee and also for the organisation.

Employees have the same rights of free speech as other members of the public and are entitled to their own political views, membership of a political party and may stand for political office. However, it is important for employees to distinguish when comments offered on election-related matters are their own personal opinions and to avoid attributing those opinions as being representative of council as an organisation.

In particular, employees must not make comment to the media (including via social media e.g. Facebook) about election matters. Any media queries are to go through the normal channels.

Political campaigns

Staff should not take part in any activity related to the election campaign of a current or aspiring elected member. This includes attendance at private campaign strategy meetings, involvement in public meetings (unless competing candidates are involved) and taking part in any activity that could be seen to be a campaign activity.

Staff standing for political office

Council staff may stand for election but should discuss this intention with their manager as there is a possibility that a conflict of interest could arise, either during a campaign or afterwards if elected, or workflows may be affected.

The Chief Executive will assess each case on its merits and one of the following determinations will be made:

1. No serious conflict of interest exists.
2. A conflict exists and ongoing employment with Wanganui District Council is incompatible with campaigning and/or holding political office. In this case, the employee must decide which they wish to pursue.
3. A conflict exists but can be satisfactorily managed by a change in work duties. Such a change would be considered at the discretion of the Chief Executive and in view of the organisation's needs at that time.

In making a decision, the Chief Executive will consult with the employee and a decision will be made promptly.

If elected to the Wanganui District Council, an employee is required by the Local Government Act 2002 to resign as an employee before taking up their position as a councillor. There is no such restriction if elected to a community board or another authority. However, the employee needs to discuss with their manager the potential impact on their current work duties.

Use of council resources

An employee standing for political office may not use council time or resources of any kind for campaigning purposes.

Staff and elected members may not use council resources for campaigning purposes. This includes internet, email, telephones, faxes, stationery, photocopiers, stamps, business cards and council venues.

Council information

The council website gives details of current elected members and will remain as current information during the pre-election period. Other information currently on the website will be retained.

Council leaders and spokespeople will continue to communicate matters of council business to the public.

Where information is supplied by the council to a candidate for campaign purposes, the information should also be made available to other candidates on request.

Application of protocols

These protocols are generally a matter of applying commonsense. Any breaches of the protocols may result in disciplinary action. If you are unsure about whether a request or activity is in breach of the protocols, please discuss with your manager.

Kevin Ross
Chief Executive