

ELECTION PERIOD POLICY

Chapter 7



ELECTION PERIOD POLICY

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1. PURPOSE

The *Local Government Act 2020* ('the Act') provides that immediately prior to municipal general elections all Victorian councils enter an election period (sometimes called a 'caretaker period'). At this time certain legislative prohibitions apply to the general functions and powers of the Council among which Councils are prohibited from publishing or distributing electoral matter. The Act also mandates that Council must prepare, adopt and maintain an election period policy.

The election period extends from the last day nominations for the election can be received, until 6pm on election day. During this lead up period to the general elections, Council needs to avoid actions and decisions which could be perceived as intended to affect the results of an election, give Councillor candidates an advantage or have a significant impact on or unnecessarily bind the incoming Council.

The purpose of this Policy therefore is to explain to the local community and candidates for election to Council how Manningham City Council will conduct its business over the election period to ensure that:-

- Council is able to continue to deliver normal works and services to the local community;
- Council avoids making decisions that may be interpreted as influencing voters;
- the elections are not compromised by inappropriate electioneering by Councillors; and
- to safeguard the authority of the incoming council.

This Policy has been developed in order to ensure that the general elections are conducted in a manner that is fair and equitable to all candidates, and are publicly perceived as such.

The principles contained within this Policy will ensure transparent and accountable governance practices are in place in the lead up to and throughout the election period.

2. POLICY STATEMENT

Manningham City Council, in stating its commitment to the principle of fair and democratic elections, adopts and endorses the practices detailed within this policy statement in addition to the legislative requirements within the Act.

2.1 Prohibited decisions

Council is prohibited from making any Council decision:

- (a) during the election period for a general election that:
 - (i) relates to the appointment or remuneration of the Chief Executive Officer but not to the appointment or remuneration of an Acting Chief Executive Officer; or
 - (ii) commits the Council to expenditure exceeding one per cent of the Council's income from general rates, municipal charges and service rates and charges in the preceding financial year; or

- (iii) the Council considers could be reasonably deferred until the next Council is in place; or
 - (iv) the Council considers should not be made during an election period; or
- (b) during the Election period for a general election or a by-election that would enable the use of Council's resources in a way that is intended to influence, or is likely to influence, voting at the election.

2.2 What is a Council decision?

For the purposes of clause 2.1 of this Policy, **Council decision** means the following:

- (a) a resolution made at a Council meeting; or
- (b) a resolution made at a meeting of a delegated committee; or
- (c) the exercise of a power or the performance of a duty or function of Council by a member of Council staff (which includes the Chief Executive Officer) or a Community Asset Committee under delegation.

2.3 Council Meetings during the Election Period

- 2.3.1 Council acknowledges that in the lead up to its general elections, it will not make any decision that would, or could be perceived to, inappropriately bind an incoming Council or affect the outcome of the elections.
- 2.3.2 Council acknowledges that Councillors have been elected to represent the local community and this obligation continues during the Election period. Councillors must avoid any conflict, or appearance of conflict, between their role as Councillor and their role as a candidate or prospective candidate.
- 2.3.3 To ensure the general day-to-day administration of Council is not held up for an excessive time period, Council will hold a Council meeting in October to consider routine administrative matters and the Annual Report.
- 2.3.4 The Chief Executive Officer will ensure that no matters that would be contrary to this Policy are presented to Council for discussion, consideration or decision.
- 2.3.5 The Chief Executive Officer will also ensure that none of the following matters will be presented to the October Council meeting:-
- Adoption of a new policy, strategy or significant planning amendment;
 - Adoption of a new rate or charge;
 - The purchase or sale of land;
 - The approval of community grants;
 - The spending of unbudgeted monies;
 - The conduct of any public consultation on significant issues;
 - Changes to the annual budget or capital works program; or
 - Any other matter that the Chief Executive Officer deems could affect voting in an election, significantly affects the municipality, local community or will unreasonably bind the incoming Council.
- 2.3.6 The following activities, normally held at a Council meeting, will not be permitted during the Election period:
- Public Question Time;
 - Petitions;
 - Presentations;

- Councillor Reports and Question Time;
- Rescission or alteration motions; or
- Notices of Motion.

- 2.3.7 No meetings of Delegated Committees, Advisory Committees, or Strategic Briefing Sessions will be held during the Election period.
- 2.3.8 The Chief Executive Officer will, where possible, ensure that any matters requiring a Council decision are scheduled to go to a Council Meeting prior to the commencement of the Election period or deferred for determination by the incoming Council. The determination as to whether any matter is to go to a Council meeting will be made by the Chief Executive Officer.

2.4 Community Engagement and Consultation

- 2.4.1 Community engagement is about involving stakeholders (those people affected by a decision) and the community in a decision-making process. A sound engagement process offers opportunities for residents and key stakeholders to contribute to and influence decisions that directly affect their community.
- 2.4.2 After the commencement of the Election period, Council will not commence public consultation on any matter which, in the opinion of the Chief Executive Officer, is a matter which is likely to affect voting at the elections. If public consultation on such a matter commenced prior to the beginning of the Election period, it shall be held in abeyance until after the election.
- 2.4.3 Other public consultations, including public submissions and hearings pursuant to section 223 of the *Local Government Act 1989*, during the election period are to be avoided.
- 2.4.4 The requirements of clause 2.4.3 may not apply to statutorily required consultation under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* or matters of a special or emergency nature. In such circumstances, the Chief Executive Officer must justify the special circumstances requiring the public consultation to the local community and ensure that the public consultation session is managed and chaired by a Director or the Chief Executive Officer and not the Mayor or a Councillor.
- 2.4.5 The Mayor and Councillors are entitled to attend any public consultation session held within the Election period. If attending in an official capacity, Councillors must not use their attendance as an opportunity for electioneering.
- 2.4.6 Consultations will avoid any express or implied links to the election.

2.5 Council Events

- 2.5.1 No Council events, either sponsored or under the auspices of or run by Council, are to take place during the Election period. This includes Council sponsored events such as launches, festivals and any other public forum outside of the normal Council meeting cycle.
- 2.5.2 An event will only be conducted if it is unexpected or unavoidable (such as Seniors Week) and with the express permission of the Chief Executive Officer. If an event is to be undertaken, the Chief Executive Officer must justify to the local community why it is being held and how risks over influencing the election will be mitigated or prevented.
- 2.5.3 At any such event conducted pursuant to 2.5.2, Councillors are able to attend, as is any candidate, but are not to have any official role at the event and the event is to be managed and chaired by a Director or the Chief Executive Officer and not the Mayor or a Councillor.
- 2.5.4 Publicity of Council events (if any during the period) will be restricted to the communication of factual material only and will not feature, mention, quote or contain any photo of any Councillor.
- 2.5.5 No Councillor participation at Council sponsored events (if any during the Election period) will be permitted, except for the Mayor, pursuant to clause 2.5.7.
- 2.5.6 No election material or active campaigning is to be conducted at any Council events (if any during the election period) and no Council event is to be used for, or linked in any way, to a candidate's election campaign.
- 2.5.7 Any citizenship ceremonies should be planned to be held outside the Election period, but if this is unavoidable, the participation of the Mayor at such a ceremonial event is permitted as the participants will not be voters at the general elections. Any speech by the Mayor at a citizenship ceremony must be written by Council Staff and approved by the Chief Executive Officer and read by the Mayor as prepared.

2.6 Candidates' Access to Information

- 2.6.1 While it is important that sitting Councillors continue to receive information that is necessary to fulfil their existing elected roles, it is also important that candidates at the elections have equal rights to Council held information relevant to their election campaigns.
- 2.6.2 Any requests for information from Councillors or candidates during the Election period should be directed in the first instance to the Chief Executive Officer or their delegate.
- 2.6.3 Neither Councillors nor candidates will receive information or advice from Council staff that might be perceived to support election campaigns. Only information that can be reasonably accessed will be released.

- 2.6.4 Information and briefing material prepared for Councillors during the Election period will relate only to factual matters or to existing Council services to assist Councillors in conducting normal day to day activities. Any information or briefing material to be provided is only to be sent by the appropriate Director or the Chief Executive Officer or their delegate.
- 2.6.5 To ensure complete transparency in the provision of all information and advice during the election period, an Information Request Register will be established. This register will record all requests for information including those under 2.6.3 made by all candidates (including existing Councillors) relating to electoral and other matters and the responses given to those requests. The register will be a public document available for public inspection and displayed on Council's website. This is to ensure that this information is available to all candidates in the election. It will be managed and maintained by the Governance Team commencing on the opening of nominations.
- 2.6.6 Section 123 of the *Local Government Act 2020* concerns the misuse of position by a Councillor and prescribes serious penalties for any Councillor who inappropriately makes use of their position or information obtained in their role as a Councillor, to gain an advantage for themselves or any other person.

2.7 Council Publications and Electoral Matter

It is prohibited under section 304 of the Act for a Councillor or member of Council staff to print, publish or distribute, or to cause, permit or authorise others to print, publish or distribute on behalf of the Council, any advertisement, handbill, pamphlet or notice that contains electoral matter during the election period. This is to ensure that Council does not use public funds that may influence or be seen to influence people's voting intentions. Electoral matter is any matter that is "intended or likely to affect voting in an election" and includes (but is not limited to) material that deals with the election, candidates or issues of contention in the election.

2.7.1 Material is electoral matter if it:

- Publicises the strengths or weaknesses of a candidate;
- Advocates the policies of the Council or of a candidate;
- Responds to claims made by a candidate;
- Publicises the achievements of the elected Council;
- Publicises matters that have already been the subject of public debate;
- Relates to matters that are known to be contentious in the local community and likely to be the subject of election debate;
- Deals with election candidates statements; or
- Refers to Councillors or candidates by name or by implicit reference.

2.7.2 **Considerations of Chief Executive Officer in granting publication approval**

In considering whether to grant approval for the publication of material during the Election period the Chief Executive Officer:

- (a) **Must not permit** any materials to be published which include reference to the following:
 - (i) the election;
 - (ii) a candidate in the election;
 - (iii) a current Councillor; or
 - (iv) an issue before the voters in connection with the election.

- (b) **May approve the** publication of material which only contains factual information about:
 - (i) the election process itself; or
 - (ii) Council information that does not include any reference to a current Councillor otherwise precluded by this policy.

2.7.3 **Council Agendas and Reports**

During the Election period, the Chief Executive Officer will ensure that an “**Election Period Statement**” is included in every report submitted to any Council meeting for a decision.

The “Election Period Statement” will advise that Council may make a decision regarding the subject of the report in compliance with Council’s Election Period Policy.

During the Election period, Council will not make a decision on any matter or report that does not include the Election Period Statement.

2.7.4 **Annual Report**

The Annual Report is an exempt document from the requirements of this Election Period Policy. However, Council will ensure that the Annual Report produced in any Election period will not contain any material that could be regarded as overt electioneering or that inappropriately promotes individual Councillors.

Information referring to specific Councillors will be limited to names, titles, contact details, membership of committees and other bodies to which they have been appointed by Council. A Mayor’s message will be included and will be restricted to general Council business and not the specific achievements of elected representatives. The Chief Executive Officer will determine the appropriate content for an Annual Report produced in an Election period.

2.7.5 **Councillor- Issued Materials**

Councillors may publish campaign material on their own behalf, but cannot claim or imply that the material originated from, or was authorised by, Manningham City Council. For example, the use of Council logos, photographs, Council images etc. is not permitted.

Councillors must also ensure that they comply with the Individual Councillor Communications Protocol when publishing campaign materials.

2.8 Websites

- 2.8.1 No Electoral matter will be placed on Council websites during the Election period.
- 2.8.2 The Chief Executive Officer will ensure that during the Election period the only new publications on Council websites will be those that do not breach this Policy, are essential for the conduct of Council operations and are apolitical in nature.
- 2.8.3 For the avoidance of doubt, Council agendas, minutes and the Annual Report can be published on Council's websites.
- 2.8.4 For the duration of the Election period a statement will be placed on Council's Websites advising that Council will not be regularly updating or adding new information during the election period other than necessary operational information.
- 2.8.5 Material published on Council's website in advance of the Election period is permitted, however existing material that is prominently displayed will be reviewed and consideration given to the removal of any such material that would be considered Electoral matter, were it to be published during the Election period.
- 2.8.6 Profiles of the Mayor and Councillors will be removed from Council's websites during the Election period but their contact details i.e. names, photos and mobile numbers will remain to assist with their day-to-day role as a Councillor.

2.9 Social Media

- 2.9.1 No Electoral matter will be posted on Council's social media sites during the Election period. Any publication on Council's social media sites during the Election period must be approved by the Chief Executive Officer or their delegate.
- 2.9.2 Staff responsible for administering individual social media sites will monitor their respective sites during the Election period and use moderation features where available to ensure no Electoral matter is posted.
- 2.9.3 Social media activity during the Election period is to conform with the following:-
- Social media posts to be kept to a minimum, necessary operational information only;
 - No launches or announcements of any new projects, policy initiatives, or programs;
 - On all social media pages the 'post comments' from all facilities to be disabled;
 - YouTube videos to be removed and suspended during the period;
 - No matter is permitted that may be construed as Electoral matter – accounts should be reviewed to ensure there is none;

- No posting of or responding to political content is permitted;
- During this time ensure moderation of all social media accounts; and
- Keep all updates to a minimum.

2.9.4 For the duration of the Election period a statement will be placed on social media sites advising that Council will not be regularly updating or adding new information during the Election period other than necessary operational information.

2.10 Media Services

2.10.1 During the Election period Council's Communications Unit's services must not be used in any way that might promote or be perceived as promoting a Councillor as an election candidate.

2.10.2 Council publicity and media releases during the Election period will be restricted to communicating normal Council activities and initiatives and any such publicity will be subject to approval by the Chief Executive Officer or their delegate.

2.10.3 Media releases will exclude references to individual Councillors.

2.10.4 The Chief Executive Officer or their delegate will be the media spokesperson on any media releases.

2.10.5 Councillors

Councillors will not use their position as an elected representative or their access to Council Staff and other Council resources to gain media attention in support of an election campaign.

2.10.6 Council Employees

During the Election period no Council employee may make any public statement that relates to an election issue unless prior approval has been obtained from the Chief Executive Officer.

2.11 Use of Council Resources

2.11.1 It is an established democratic principle that public resources must not be used in a manner that would influence the way people vote in elections. Council commits to this principle in that it will ensure Council resources are not used inappropriately during the Election period while recognising that Councillors are entitled to continue to have access to those resources necessary for them to fulfil their elected roles and normal day-to-day duties to the local community.

2.11.2 Council resources include, but are not limited to vehicles, equipment, computers, printers, mobile and landline phones, stationery, images, printing/copy services, meeting rooms, hospitality services, Council staff and support staff.

2.11.3 In order to ensure the proper use of Council resources during the Election period the following will apply:-

- Councillors may **continue to use any Council resources** provided to them to facilitate their performance of **normal Councillor duties**, subject to existing protocols and terms of use. Councillors standing for re-election must not use such Council resources to assist with their election campaign;
- Reimbursements of Councillors' **out-of-pocket expenses** during the Election period will only apply to costs that have been incurred in the performance of normal Council duties, and not for expenses that could be perceived as supporting or being connected with a candidate's election campaign;
- **Equipment** provided to Councillors for the purpose of conducting normal Council business, such as **mobile phones, land lines and internet connections**, laptop or tablet will not be used for campaigning purposes;
- No Council **logos, letterheads, or other Council branding** should be used for, or linked in any way to, a candidate's election campaign;
- **Photos or images** taken by or provided by Council are not to be used by Councillors for the purposes of electioneering or in support of their election campaign. This applies equally to images on Council websites that may be able to be copied;
- Any **email account** provided by Council to a Councillor to assist in representing the local community and undertaking normal day-to-day Councillor duties must not be used in electioneering and campaigning;
- **Community or Ward meetings** will not be held during the Election period;
- No Council owned **vehicle** is to be used by a Councillor during the Election period for attending any event other than an official Council event at which the Councillor is representing Council in an authorised official capacity;
- During the Election period the **Mayoral robes** and **Chain of Office** are only to be worn on official civic occasions such as Council meetings and citizenship ceremonies and not to be worn or displayed in any manner at any event that is not an official Council event.

2.11.4 A Councillor or candidate at the election, must not ask a member of Council staff to undertake any tasks connected directly or indirectly with a candidate's election campaign.

2.11.5 In the course of employment Council **staff must not**:-
(a) undertake an activity that may affect voting in the election; or
(b) authorise, use or allocate a Council resource for any purpose that may influence voting in the election.

Any Council staff member who thinks they are being placed in a **compromising situation** by a request from a Councillor or candidate should refer the Councillor or candidate to the Chief Executive Officer for clarification. They should also advise their Manager of their concern.

2.11.6 Prior to the election period the Chief Executive Officer will ensure that all members of Council **staff are advised of their obligations** in regard to the application of this Policy.

2.11.7 A copy of this Policy will be included in candidate information packs distributed at candidate information sessions.

2.12 Use of the Councillor Title

2.12.1 Councillors may use their title “Councillor” in their election material, as they continue to hold office during the Election period. While a Councillor can refer to themselves as Councillor in communications it must be made clear that it is a communication of a candidate and not a position of Council.

2.13 Breach of Policy

2.13.1 Any breach of this Policy relating to officer conduct is to be referred to the Chief Executive Officer.

2.13.2 Alleged breaches relating to all other matters are to be referred to the Victorian Local Government Inspectorate.

2.14 Administrative Updates

2.14.1 From time to time, circumstances may change leading to the need for minor administrative changes to this Policy. Where an update does not materially alter this Policy, such a change may be made administratively. Examples of minor administrative changes include changes to names of Manningham Council departments or a minor amendment to legislation that does not have material impact. Where any change or update may materially change the intent of this policy, it must be considered and only approved by Council.

3. SCOPE OF POLICY

This Policy applies to all Councillors and Council Staff during the Election period which starts on the last day on which nominations for the election can be received by the Election Manager and concludes on the Election Day.

Council committee members who are candidates for election are expected to comply with this policy and in addition:

- return any Council equipment, documents or information which are not available to the public for the duration of the election period; and
- if elected, immediately resign from the committee.

4. RESPONSIBILITY

The Chief Executive Officer or their delegate is the officer ultimately responsible for the implementation of this Policy with the being responsible for the operational aspects.

5. DEFINITIONS

In this policy:-

Chief Executive Officer means the person appointed by a Council to be its Chief Executive Officer or any person acting in that position.

Council means the Manningham City Council.

Council Events means a gathering of people or a ceremony of some significance, either run by Council or auspiced by Council, that celebrates or recognises some specific aspect of community and generally creates publicity.

Councillor means a person who holds the office of member of a Council.

Councillor Code of Conduct means the code of conduct made pursuant to the requirements of the *Local Government Act 2020*.

Council staff means an employee of Manningham City Council.

Note - The Chief Executive Officer is also a member of Council staff.

Electoral advertisement, handbill, pamphlet or notice means an advertisement, handbill, pamphlet or notice that contains electoral matter, but does not include an advertisement in a newspaper announcing the holding of a meeting.

Electoral matter means matter which is intended or likely to affect voting in an election but does not include any electoral material produced by or on behalf of the Election Manager for the purposes of conducting an election. Without limiting the generality of the definition of **electoral matter**, matter is to be taken to be intended or likely to affect voting in an election if it contains an express or implicit reference to, or comment on -

- (a) the election; or
- (b) a candidate in the election; or
- (c) an issue submitted to, or otherwise before, the voters in connection with the election.

Election period, in relation to an election, means the period that -

- (a) starts on the last day on which nominations for that election can be received; and
- (b) ends at 6 pm on election day.

Local community includes -

- (a) people who live in the municipal district
- (b) people and bodies who are ratepayers
- (c) people and bodies who conduct activities in the municipal district.

Municipal district means the district under the local government of a Council.

Printed electoral material means an advertisement, handbill, pamphlet or notice that contains electoral matter.

Publish means publish by any means including by publication on the Internet.

Ward means a subdivision of a municipal district.

6. RELATED POLICIES

- POL/545 - Council Expenses Policy
- POL/416 - Social Media Policy
- POL/478 - Councillor IT Support and Equipment Policy
- Media Policy
- Manningham Councillor Code of Conduct
- Manningham Employee Code of Conduct

7. ACTION PLANS

Nil.

8. GUIDELINES

Nil.

9. DOCUMENT HISTORY

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Contact Details

Council's Governance Team 9840 9210

www.manningham.vic.gov.au