

Political Interests

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Contents

1	Political Interests	3
1.1	Definition	3
1.2	Conflicts of interest	3
1.3	Campaigning	4
1.4	Maintaining impartiality during the election period	4



1 Political Interests

Local Healthwatch must be seen as independent and accessible to all sections of the community, and as representing all parts of the community, reflecting the experiences they have of health and social care services. This requires local Healthwatch to have a very clear position on independence from any political bias, to promote trusting relationships with all the community.

Given the collective nature of the network, there is a shared responsibility to ensure all local Healthwatch act to uphold the reputation of the Healthwatch brand. Therefore, it is critical that all members of the Healthwatch network act in a politically neutral manner and do not engage in activities, or advocate for, any political parties.

1.1 Definition

An individual's political interest is a potential conflict of interest, as it could improperly influence the performance of their duties and responsibilities. This may lead to a local Healthwatch being perceived to be of a particular political character or bias, potentially leading to the politicisation of a local debate on health and social care services, but also compromise the reputation and integrity of the Healthwatch brand.

1.2 Conflicts of interest

A political conflict of interest involves a conflict between the public duty and the private interest, in which the person's private-political interest could improperly influence the performance of their duties and responsibilities.

An actual conflict of interest may arise when a member of the Healthwatch (exec or non-exec) is asked to undertake a role that directly affects or impacts their personal political interests.

Importantly, some conflicts may only be perceived—a member's involvement could be questioned based on a personal political interest that may not actually have an impact.



A potential conflict of interest arises where a member has political interests that could conflict with their duties in the future, or where a member has competing interests because they undertake a political role during elections.

1.3 Campaigning

The regulations affecting local Healthwatch prevent them from being set up as a political body or making political activities its main activity. The regulations allow local Healthwatch to speak out and to campaign (including for policy or legislative change) provided it is in support of their core purpose of being a consumer champion.

Local Healthwatch must not give support or funding to a political party. Local Healthwatch must not be used as a vehicle for the expression of political views, or endorse or comment upon any party or candidate, but instead concentrate on the issue that they are raising as it relates to consumers.

1.4 Maintaining impartiality during the election period

During an election period, both for local and national elections, it is critical that all members of the Healthwatch network continue to act in a politically neutral manner and do not engage in activities, or advocate positions, which are party political.

Local Healthwatch should continue to operate as usual and carry out day-to-day activities. However, it would be advisable to have an early discussion with your local authority commissioner to establish if there will be any specific guidance that the local authority will expect local Healthwatch to comply with.

It is also important to consider the implications and risks around conducting communications and external engagement activity during politically sensitive times, and particular consideration to the following issues:

- Not favouring any party or candidate: local Healthwatch must be impartial and be careful not to give, or to be perceived to give, greater prominence in any activities or events to any individual party or prospective Parliamentary candidates.



- Declaration of political activities: if anyone directly involved in local Healthwatch delivery is standing for election, or has links to a particular political or campaigning organisation, it is essential that they declare their interest and do not make public statements on behalf of Healthwatch or using Healthwatch resources. In the lead up to any political elections a review of your conflicts of interest would be advisable, using the ‘conflicts of interest’ management steps (see the conflicts of interest summary).
- Publishing new reports: local Healthwatch can continue to publish reports on Enter and View activities. However, it will be important to bear in mind that material which would normally be considered objective and impartial may well be seen as political and attract criticism in this highly sensitive period. Therefore, it will be important to consider if it is the most appropriate time to release the report.
- Social media: particular care should be paid to social media, specifically to ensuring that you do not retweet tweets from a political or campaigning organisation who is advocating party political positions. As ever, local Healthwatch representatives should be careful not to issue any personal opinions on Twitter and Facebook or issue any tweets from a Healthwatch account that could be perceived as party political.
- Media enquiries: during this sensitive time it is possible for comment made to the media to be taken out of context or misinterpreted and used in a way which could call in to question your organisation’s political impartiality. If your Healthwatch is contacted by a journalist during purdah we advise that you direct them to material that is already in the public domain, for example, previous statements that you have released on issues. You should avoid offering additional comment or opinion and if a journalist asks questions directly about Healthwatch any comment you make should be purely factual. If you are being pushed for comment by a journalist and are keen to maintain relationships, our media team suggest directing requests to local voluntary groups who share similar views on the issue.
- Speeches and attendance at events: it is especially important that local Healthwatch do not become involved in, or comment on, party political issues during the election campaign. It is not appropriate for representatives of local Healthwatch to take part in speaking engagements and events where they will be asked to comment on or advocate for a particular party position.



Additional information

- The guidance on the [Local Healthwatch Regulations from the Department of Health and Local Government Association](#) provides more information on restrictions on activities of a political nature.
- It would be useful to consult the [Code of Recommended Practice on Local Authority Publicity](#) which provides statutory guidance for local authorities about publicity during the pre-election
- The General Election Guidance 2010 provides further information about considerations to bear in mind during a General Election: [General Election Guidance 2010](#)

Register recording the disclosure of a political interest.

Restrict a politically active member's involvement during elections.

Remove from involvement in the matter.

Relinquish the political involvement.

Resignation may be an option if the above are not practical



