PURDAH EXPLAINED

Finally, we're under starter's orders - the long anticipated general election is on its way.

And as soon as elections are mentioned, everyone - especially journalists - seems to start shouting ‘Purdah!’ at every opportunity. But what does it actually mean, and how will it affect your organisation? To spare you reading 39 pages of official guidance, we’ve created a handy guide.

WHAT?

Purdah is the name given to the period from the announcement of an election until polling day when restrictions are placed on the activity of public bodies, civil servants and local government officials. Typically, it starts six weeks before the election.

The word comes from the Urdu, meaning ‘curtain’ or ‘veil’. In essence, Purdah is designed to stop public bodies from doing anything that could influence the result of the election. For example, the government can’t put out ‘good news’ stories and there will be no Whitehall policy announcements on which a future government could take a different view. Cabinet Office guidance was published in 2017, but its implementation and enforcement still rely heavily on convention and interpretation.

Most Purdah rules are common sense, and many are part of NHS organisations’ communications and operational policy during normal times. Crucially, they don’t mean that activity in your organisation has to grind to a halt. There’s a tendency for public bodies to use Purdah as a convenient excuse for not doing things on which Purdah has absolutely no bearing.
DO THE RESTRICTIONS INCLUDE THE NHS?

The official guidance does not formally apply to NHS organisations, and NHS staff are not regarded as civil servants. But NHS organisations, including arm’s-length bodies such as NHS England, CQC and NHS Improvement, are ‘strongly advised’ by NHS Improvement to abide by the rules. I think we all know what ‘strong advice’ is!

In 2017, for example, the publication of NHS budget deficits was delayed until after the election had taken place.

HOW?

During Purdah, NHS organisations should not make announcements or do anything that could influence, or be construed as influencing, the outcome of the election.

And with health and social care very high on the political agenda, that means treading carefully.

DON’T:

• Allow participation by NHS representatives in local or national debates or events that could be politically controversial.
• Undertake any activity that could be considered politically controversial or influential, or could attract criticism that public money is being used for party-political purposes or campaigning. This includes public awareness activities that could be deemed party-political, market research and public rallies, and producing election materials or canvassing.
• Invite some political parties/campaign groups to your premises but not others: invitations should be sent to all or none.
• Allow party-political meetings to take place on your organisation’s premises.
• Allow visits by local candidates/political parties or campaign groups to your organisation which interrupt services or patient care.
• Launch large-scale PR campaigns or consultations.
• Publish responses to existing consultations.
• Undertake proactive media work on issues that could be politically contentious.
• Use existing marketing material promoting politically contentious issues, and don’t make it available to prospective parliamentary candidates; neither must the NHS logo be used on candidates’ communications.
DO

• Reply to requests for information in an impartial way - as you normally would.
• Brief MPs and ministers (now prospective parliamentary candidates) in accordance with usual practice, ensuring that all information is factual.
• Allow NHS employees to take part in party-political activities in a personal capacity, but ensure there’s no suggestion that they are supported by your organisation, or the NHS.

BEWARE SOCIAL MEDIA

(Although your existing social media policy will probably cover many of these rules)
• Don’t retweet or share political opinion or content posted by political parties or politicians.
• Don’t tweet, post images or share updates on politically controversial topics.
• Check your website and delete any content that could be construed as party-political

AND FINALLY

Check anything not covered here in the official 2017 guidance from the Cabinet Office.

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