Advice and Guidance for the 2019 Local Elections

Key points:

- This guide aims to help staff and students who may wish to undertake activity during the election period.

- The University of Sussex is regulated by the Electoral Commission during the election period. This means we have a legal responsibility to comply with specific rules about how we engage with politicians/parties and these should be followed during the regulated period – the timeframe where individuals/parties will be campaigning to be elected to office.

- Sussex is politically neutral and should be seen to be independent from party politics. This allows us to use our voice effectively to act as advocates for staff and students, on behalf of the institution, throughout the year.

- The University recognises that academics and staff may wish to comment on or critique policy positions. The principles of academic freedom continue to be encouraged and celebrated at Sussex.

- If you would like to work with, or are approached by a local politician or candidate during this period, or are planning any events involving any political representative (including candidates not affiliated with a party) or are aware of any staff/students who are planning to stand as a candidate, please contact a member of the External Relations division. Details are at the end of this document.

- Please be mindful about any communications or endorsements you may make from University accounts or channels (including comments, reports, briefings, emails, tweets, Facebook posts, posters) and ensure they are not party-political, or in any way infer University support of one candidate over another.

- This document will be posted on the University’s website and will be refreshed with any updates, as appropriate, including information from Universities UK.

BACKGROUND

The local elections offer Sussex students and staff a great opportunity to engage with candidates and debate a range of issues related to the political process and the governing of the local area. The External Relations division will continue to identify and undertake activity to appropriately promote Sussex, its staff and students during this period – such as providing expert commentary in the media.

In addition, the University will be working with the Students’ Union, student societies and colleagues throughout the institution to arrange hustings for candidates. The External Relations division is in touch with the political parties and related stakeholders on this front. If you are planning to hold your own political event or are approached by any candidates who wish to visit Sussex during the campaign period, please contact the Head of Public Affairs, we will be able to provide advice and if needed, support you with arrangements. Contact details are at the back of this document.

The University is required to comply with the Transparency of Lobbying, Non Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014. The legislation is regulated and enforced by the Electoral Commission who provide guidance to non-party campaigners during the election.
As a registered charity, the University of Sussex must comply with Charity Commission guidelines relating to UK charities and elections. The main principle from the guidelines is that charities must ‘retain the essential quality of independence’.

Various local council seats will be contested on 2 May 2019. This advice note will apply from now until the results of the elections in each local authority area are declared.

PURDAH

‘Purdah’, the rules governing the conduct of the civil service and non-departmental government bodies including research councils and the Office for Students (OfS), will begin no later than 26 March. The Local Government Association have produced helpful guidance and the Cabinet Office tend to produce closer to the election. As an aid the guidance issued by the Cabinet Office about Purdah for the last local election can be read here. Purdah may cover announcements related to research at Sussex funded by local authorities, or where the University has partnered with local authorities.

The following guidance needs to be considered during the Purdah period:

- Researchers called upon to provide expert comment about the elections or local issues during this period should do so under their organisational affiliation and not attribute research to the funding body. This also applies to printed materials such as features in commercial magazines and newsletters, which may have been scheduled before the election was announced.
- Researchers scheduled to deliver papers or speak about their research at academic or public conferences relevant to the elections must not attribute their research to the funding body.
- Any Government Department or UK Research Council funded data which relates to voting patterns, or predicts or influences voting behaviour that is currently not in the public domain should not be published during this period. This includes publication in magazines and newsletters, press releases and press announcements and academic conferences.
- Any posts to websites and social media platforms should be done with due care and attention to the principles above. When writing blogs, posting views or content on websites and public social media sites about election-related issues please ensure that they are not attributed to funding from a UK Government department or Research Council, or associated with its investment.

ENGAGING WITH POLITICIANS

Sussex is politically neutral and cannot be perceived to be providing its support to any one political party, candidate or politician. If you are uncertain about whether your activity or interaction is fully compliant with the relevant legislation and regulation, we recommend you discuss the details with a member of the External Relations division. The normal events and freedom of speech policies apply throughout the year so you will also need to ensure your activities are in line with the usual University processes. These policies can be found here.

You may be asked to provide your support to a candidate in the form of a quote for campaign literature or other form of endorsement for a candidate, such as a social media post. You are of course free to do this as an individual. However it is requested that you do not reference your role or association with the University of Sussex as it may lead to implied support of a candidate by the institution.

DEALING WITH PRINT, BROADCAST AND SOCIAL MEDIA

You may want to share your views via your personal social media accounts, or be asked for your opinion by journalists. It is vital that any party political comments you make are kept separate from your role at Sussex.
Even if it is your own personal Twitter or Facebook (or other social media) account, it could be apparent from your profile or a quick online search that you work for the University. People may perceive you to be representing Sussex so please be mindful of how you phrase your post. Even if your profile is private, people within your social circles may choose to share this publically. Please consider the following:

- If your social media account states that you work for the University, please ensure your profile also mentions that ‘views are your own and are not necessarily those of the University’.
- Check how you have phrased something to limit the chances of it being misinterpreted.
- Retweeting comments or links to articles may be interpreted as a reflection of your own views.
- Take note if you are regularly posting stories from a particular type of publication or website, which may be associated with certain political views.
- Honorific titles bestowed by the University, such as Professor, should not be used if you are showing your personal support for a party or candidate, as it relates to your place of employment.

If you are approached with a request to do a media interview, in your professional capacity, please treat this like any other journalist enquiry and let the press office know. Ideally this would happen ahead of the interview so the team can provide you or the journalist with any additional support.

STANDING AS CANDIDATES, ACTING AS PARTY OFFICIALS OR CAMPAIGNING FOR A POLITICAL PARTY/ CANDIDATE

How and what staff wish to do for a political party is a matter for the individual, as long as they do this work in their own time and not during the time they are employed by Sussex, at University premises, or with University resources. Candidates or party officials (including volunteers) must ensure it is clear they do not represent the University whilst participating in campaign activities.

If you wish to stand as a candidate, or are a party official, you should declare this to the University as soon as this is confirmed. Given the amount of time expected for campaigning and the hours, candidates should also speak to their line manager about taking annual leave.

For further information, please contact the External Relations division: 01273 678 8888

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