

# **NPR Guidance**

## Guidance notes for councillors, parish councillors and campaigners

# Neighbourhood Plan Referendum Guidance

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### Purpose of the guidance

This outlines the key issues that apply in relation to publicity during the period leading up to any Neighbourhood Plan Referendum. This period runs from publication date to the information statement (A minimum of 28 days before the date of the referendum) to the date of the referendum.

### Publicity:

- Councillors can create their own publicity in their capacity as a member of a campaign group, provided council resources are not used.
- All councillors must comply with the provisions of the adopted Code of Conduct.
- Council business will continue during a referendum period. This includes publicity around normal council business and events. However this must be carefully thought through to ensure council business is not used or allowed to be used or manipulated by anyone in relation to the referendum.
- Before arranging any events in the referendum area involving councillors, advice must be sought from the Parish Clerk who may liaise with the elections team at Three Rivers.
- Councillors representing the referendum area should not be quoted in any council press releases issued (if any) relating to the referendum.
- No posters or leaflets must be displayed on council premises (including street furniture) or vehicles.
- Views if the referendum question, which could be seen as in favour of or against the proposal, must not be published by Three Rivers District Council or a parish/town council/
- Press releases issued by Three Rivers District Council or a parish/town council should not be used to support or oppose the referendum question.
- Councillors in the neighbourhood Plan area need to maintain a clear distinction between their official duties as a service councillor and their involvement with any campaign relating to the referendum. During the referendum period councillors may continue to deal with ward work and represent their constituents.

- Particular care must be taken by councillors who hold positions of responsibility within a council where, by virtue of their role, they could be seen to be supporting or opposing a referendum question.

### **Referendum Expenses:**

The maximum amount of expenses which can be incurred is calculated in accordance with 2012 Regulations and is published in the information statement.

A maximum of “2362 plus £0.059 for each entry in the relevant register of electors may be spent by campaign organisers in connection with the referendum campaign.

It is an offence for a campaign organizer to exceed the referendum expenses limit expressed. The exact amount allowed for each neighbourhood plan referendum area will be published in the information statement.

Expenses mean the expenses incurred by or on behalf of any individual or body during the referendum period in relation to:

- Advertising of any nature
- Unsolicited material addressed to voters
- Information about the referendum, information about the question, arguments for and against
- Market research or canvassing
- Provision of any property, services or facilities in connection with press conferences or dealings with the media
- Transport (by any means) or persons to anywhere with a view to obtaining publicity in connection with a referendum campaign.
- Rallies and other events, including public meetings

Expenses also include any notional expenses, where property, services or facilities are provided free of charge or at a discount.

Campaigning groups are encouraged to register with and submit a statement of expenses to the Counting Officer.

It is an offence for a campaign organizer to exceed the referendum expenses limits and if found guilty would be liable to a fine of up to £5,000 and/or imprisonment of up to 2 months

Key Documents to be published by Three Rivers District Council

### **Information Statement specifies:**

- Where the referendum will be held

- The date on which the referendum will be held
- The question to be asked in the referendum
- A map of the referendum area
- A description of the persons entitled to vote
- The referendum expenses limit that will apply
- That the referendum will be conducted in accordance with procedures similar to local government elections
- The address and times at which a copy of the specified documents can be inspected.

**The specified documents include:**

- The draft neighbourhood plan (as proposed to be modified by the independent examiners recommendations)
- The report made by the independent examiner
- A summary of any representations submitted to the independent examiner (representations received to Regulation 16 submission consultation)
- The post examination decision statement agreed and published by Three Rivers District Council
- Planning statement which sets out general information as to town and country planning, including neighbourhood planning.

**Who to contact:**

All enquiries in relation to the referendum process should be directed to Electoral Services [Electoral.Services@Threerivers.gov.uk](mailto:Electoral.Services@Threerivers.gov.uk) or call 01923 776611

Any enquiries in relation to the Neighbourhood Plan itself please contact:

Planning Policy

## FAQs:

What does the law say? The Neighbourhood Planning (Referendum) Regulations 2012:-

- **Section 4** – publication of Information Statement and specified documents, or factual information about the referendum during the referendum period.
- **Section 5** – Prohibit the parish/town council or the planning authority (Three Rivers District Council) from publishing any promotional material other than that required to be published under Section 4.
- **Sections 6 and 7** – sets out the limit that may be spent on referendum expenses and the penalty for non-compliance.

**When do the restrictions apply?** The relevant period is from the date when the ‘Information Statement’ is published by Three Rivers District Council until the end of the referendum, this is minimum of 28 working days prior to the referendum date.

**What does publicity mean?** The meaning of publicity is wide and includes communication, in whatever form, addressed to the public as a whole or to a section of the public.

- Publicity can take the form of speeches, interviews, items on a council’s websites or noticeboards, press releases, newsletters, leaflets and newspaper articles issued by or on behalf of a council
- Publicity can also include publicity issued by organisations that receive funds from the council. For example, if the council funds an activity group which organizes an event that overtly attacks or supports a referendum campaign that could amount to a breach of the rules. A council cannot fund other organisations to produce publicity it is unable to issue itself.
- If a council holds public meetings or supports or assists in meeting organised by others then this is also caught by the provisions.

**What are the restrictions on a council’s publicity?** The law does not allow a council to publish or to assist others to publish material, which appears to be designed to affect public support for a referendum campaign. The intention behind the publication does not matter – What is important is whether it “appears” to be designed to affect support. This covers broadcast items, as well as written material.

It can cover printing, even if the same information published at another time would be considered reasonable. It is safer to avoid giving support and facilities for campaign material during the referendum period.

**What are council resources?** The definition of council resources includes: IT, telephones, fax machines, photocopiers, stationery, headed notepaper, postage, transport and staff time.

**What are the restriction on the use of council resources?** The Code of Conduct for councillors provides that a councillor must make sure that the council's resources are used for proper purposes only.

Services or facilities provided for councillors should be used exclusively for the purposes of council business or to enable the councillor concerned to discharge their function as a council. This applies to:

- Council stationery (letterheads, envelopes, compliment slips)
- Telephones and fax machines
- Photocopiers/ IT Equipment
- Officer time

The use of council resources for purely political purposes, including designing and distributing referendum campaign or part political material produced for publicity purposes is prohibited under The Councillors' Code of Conduct. Use of a council's resources in such a way is likely to amount to a breach of the code of conduct.

**What is meant by "Use of Council Resources?"** The use of council resources for referendum campaign or party political purposes covers not only the publication of campaigning material but also any other activity intended to promote purely campaign or party political interests. Examples include the use of a council's postal system to distribute campaign material or sending out material using a council E-mail address, use of staff time to carry out research to assist in promoting a campaign.

**What are the restrictions imposed?** The reason for restrictions during referendum period is not to prevent a council carrying out its normal business, but to prevent council business carried out during the referendum period being used to secure advantage for a referendum campaign. Particular care needs to be taken to ensure that publicity or council activities cannot be perceived as seeking to influence public opinion or to promote a referendum campaign.

**What happens to press releases during this period?** During the referendum period press releases about the referendum will not be made unless authorised by the Counting Officer. Factors, which will be considered, include:

- The content and style of the material
- The likely effect on those to whom it is directed
- Whether material promotes or opposes a view on a referendum question.

**What about posters and leaflets?** No Campaign posters or leaflets must be displayed on council notice boards, premises (including street furniture) or vehicles.

Any publicity material relating to the referendum published on behalf of any campaigning group should include the printer imprint – state who the material was printed for and published by.

**What about meetings during this period?** Any meeting that might be seen as being potentially contentious, in relation to a referendum should be avoided. Where a council controls the scheduling of such a meeting and it can reasonably be deferred until after the election without significant detriment, then the arrangements for the meeting should be organised accordingly.

Other meetings in support of the council's functions can still take place provided that such meetings are not used, or could reasonably be considered to give rise to the perception that they are being used, in connection with a referendum campaign.

**Can Councillors send out correspondence to constituents?** Councillors are permitted to respond to correspondence they may receive in the normal way and deal with casework as a result of surgeries. However, letters or emails, which are being sent to constituents, must have no reference to a referendum.

**Can Council premises be used for campaign meetings?** Campaigners are entitled on reasonable notice to use meeting rooms maintainable out of public funds providing there is no impact on the normal use of the room and as long as they meet the cost of the room payable at the commercial rate, including the cost of preparation, heating, lighting, staffing and similar costs and costs of damages. It is legitimate to use staff time to facilitate a booking.

#### **What sanctions apply?**

- There are severe sanctions for inappropriate behaviour during a referendum period for a council and individual councillors and officers.
- The council can be subject to action by its external auditors in the event of unlawful expenditure.
- If a councillor uses council resources for inappropriate purposes, that can be a breach of the Councillor's Code of Conduct. An employee who behaves in an inappropriate way will be in breach of the Employee Code of Conduct and could be subject to disciplinary action.
- For campaigners, referendum expenditure is clearly set out in this guidance, expenditure in excess of referendum expense limits may be a criminal offence.

