

West Lothian Council stop broadcasting committee meetings to public in run up to General Election

West Lothian Council has stopped broadcasting its committee meetings to the public in the run up to the General Election.

While most councils have offered live streaming or broadcasting of committee meetings since the Covid pandemic, few others appear to have taken what was described as a “belt and braces” approach to cut live broadcasting for what is known as “purdah” in the weeks before the election.

West Lothian Council staff and councillors acknowledged the need to follow strict rules about political statements being facilitated and made in the run up to the vote.

Recordings will still be made of the meetings and available after the 4 July poll.

The alternative for the council would have been live monitoring and editing of broadcasts, which the council does not have the resources to do.

A spokesperson for CoSLA the local authority umbrella body said: “This is rightly a matter for West Lothian Council.”

Depute council leader Councillor Kirsteen Sullivan told councillors of the change at the opening of the Economy Community Empowerment and Wealth Building PDSP she chairs on Tuesday morning.

In a statement to the Local Democracy Reporting Service: “Following the announcement of the General Election, public

bodies must adhere to guidance around planned Government and council business during the pre-election period. Councils are subject to legal rules as well as guidance.

“Stringent restrictions are in place when the Notice of Election is published – which was Friday 31 May. Normally, all council meetings are broadcast live and recorded. However, in the lead up to the election, live broadcast of council meetings will be postponed until after the General Election.

“All meetings will continue to be recorded in full, as normal, and recordings will be made available after the General Election.

“As always, members of the public can attend, to watch, in person, council and committee meetings. Those are not affected. Almost all of those meetings take place at the Civic Centre.”

Several committee meetings such as local area committees are held in council buildings around the county which do not have digital recording facilities or the ability to attend remotely as the Civic Centre has.

Asked to comment, Council Leader Labour’s Lawrence Fitzpatrick told the LDRS: “It’s not a decision that Elected Members are involved in, and rightly so.

“Council officers are bound by strict legislation around what can and cannot be done in the period leading up to elections and they must be allowed to make those decisions independently of politicians. I am sure everyone understands that.

“Should members of the public wish to attend council meetings they are, as always, welcome to do so. That isn’t affected.

“The committee papers are available. My understanding is that all meetings will continue to be recorded and will be broadcast as normal after the election.”

SNP Group Leader Janet Campbell said: “Unfortunately due to “purdah” West Lothian Council are not permitted to broadcast any comments of a political nature.

“As Council meetings very often contain ‘grandstanding’ speeches, particularly from those councillors who may also be candidates in the Westminster election, these could be viewed as the council broadcasting political content during this period.

“If any candidates were to agree to withhold from political speech making at council meetings, this would resolve this issue – it would appear this is not the case.

“Whilst members of the public will continue to have access to all council meetings, those constituents who have to rely on the meetings being broadcast to listen to council proceedings will be denied access during this period.”

Independent Councillor Andrew McGuire described the move as “belt and braces” to ensure purdah was properly observed. He added: “I think [this is] to make sure party political comments aren’t made. I’d imagine the recordings will go up very soon after.”

You can see the diary of committees at:

<https://coins.westlothian.gov.uk/coins/DocumentSearchPublic.asp>

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter