

The Government's approach to elections and referendums during COVID-19: additional information for electoral administrators, candidates, campaigners and voters

Democracy should not be cancelled because of COVID-19. The Government has confirmed that the set of local polls scheduled for 6 May will go ahead, and made a firm commitment that the Government will support the sector to deliver them.

On 5 February, the Government published the May 2021 polls [Delivery Plan](#) covering how the elections will proceed, from announcement to results.

The Government has since published further guidance on [COVID-secure campaigning](#) for the May 2021 polls, and a [note on the nominations process](#). The Electoral Commission have also produced [guidance for electoral administrators](#) on conducting the polls in the context of the pandemic.

The information set out below is designed to assist preparations by electoral administrators, candidates, campaigners and voters by providing details on some of the commonly asked questions surrounding the May 2021 polls being held in England. **Different rules and guidance may apply for polls being held in Scotland and Wales and it is essential that you follow the correct guidance for the relevant part of the UK.**

The Government will update this information as necessary in the lead up to the polls on 6 May. Any further questions not covered here may be directed to may-21-queries@cabinetoffice.gov.uk

Public health

Protecting the health of voters and staff

Minimising the transmission of COVID-19 and protecting public health is a priority during these elections and a strong set of measures are being put in place to ensure that the polls will be COVID-secure for all involved.

The Government has been working closely with the electoral community and with Public Health England since the polls were postponed in 2020, to ensure that the polls in May 2021 can be delivered effectively and in a COVID-secure way.

This was the case with the decision to proceed, and Public Health experts advised Ministers and officials from across Government departments in drawing up the Government's May 2021 polls [Delivery Plan](#).

The Electoral Commission has also published extensive [guidance](#) for electoral administrators, candidates and their agents on the operation of an election during the COVID-19 context. The Government will continue to work with the Electoral Commission to

ensure the guidance is updated as necessary, in accordance with wider restrictions, and to ensure that requirements are clear at every stage of the process, from nominations to the count.

The impact of the vaccination programme on the decision to proceed with polls

The Government is following the advice of independent experts at the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) on which groups of people to prioritise for COVID-19 vaccines. The Government's target remains to offer the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine to JCVI's priority groups 1-9 (i.e. all over-50s, those who are clinically extremely vulnerable, and certain groups with clinical conditions) by 15 April, which is ahead of the scheduled polls in May, and all adults by the end of July.

Many of these elections have already been delayed by a year. Voters have a right to be heard and to decide who governs them. There are three ways to vote in May: in person at a COVID-secure polling station; by postal vote; or by appointing a proxy to vote on your behalf. Steps are being taken to ensure the polling stations are COVID-secure for both staff and voters - whether they have received a vaccination or not. Absent voting remains an option for anyone who is shielding or who would prefer not to attend a polling station - anyone can apply for a postal or proxy vote in advance of the elections.

Voting options

Voting methods

The Government recognises that the pandemic may change people's needs and preferences towards how they cast their vote.

The Electoral Commission's [voter information resources](#) include messaging on: different ways to vote; how to cast a vote; finding the polling station; and getting help at the polling station. For further information on how to participate, please visit the [gov.uk how to vote](#) webpages. In addition, information on how to vote will be provided on poll cards.

Voting in polling stations

The Electoral Commission has this year provided further COVID-19 related content to inform voters on what measures to expect inside polling stations and how to help keep others safe when voting in person.

Voters (and staff) attending polling stations can expect to see many of the protective measures with which the public is already now familiar - hand sanitiser will be available, and distance markings and protective barriers will be in use as appropriate. All voters and staff must wear a face covering in indoor venues at polling stations unless they are exempt or have a reasonable excuse. Voters will also be encouraged to bring their own pens or pencils to mark their ballot papers (although regularly sanitised or single use pencils will be available at polling stations for those who are unable to do so).

Face coverings

Government guidance is clear that face coverings must be worn in all indoor places where social distancing may be difficult and where you will come into contact with people you do not normally meet. It is mandatory for poll workers, observers and voters to wear a face covering in indoor venues that are part of the electoral process (unless a person is exempt or has a reasonable excuse).

Absent voting options

Anyone who cannot (or who would for any reason prefer not to) attend a polling station can apply for a postal or proxy vote in advance of the elections. All those wishing to use a postal or proxy vote are encouraged to apply early. For information on how to vote by proxy, visit the 'how to vote' webpage.

Anyone can apply for a postal vote and voters have the option of requesting a postal vote until further notice (a permanent postal vote) or solely for this election, or for a particular time period. Information on how to apply is available on the [Electoral Commission website](#), and will be printed on polling cards. The deadline for postal vote applications in England and Wales is 5pm on 20 April. We are working with postal vote suppliers, electoral sector partners and election teams to ensure capacity for printing and administering postal votes, and the Royal Mail is committed to prioritising elections post.

Emergency proxy voting

Changes are being made to the rules on emergency proxy voting. Proxy voting means you can nominate someone else to vote on your behalf. These changes enable those who need to self-isolate close to election day to request an emergency proxy vote at very short notice, right up to 5pm on polling day itself. Similarly, these changes also allow electors to change their proxy until 5pm on polling day if their proxy needs to self-isolate.

Information on how to access an emergency proxy vote will be available on gov.uk and on the Electoral Commission website ahead of the polls in May, and local authorities will also be able to advise voters on how to access an emergency proxy vote.

Support for the clinically extremely vulnerable

Anyone who cannot (or who would for any reason prefer not to) attend a polling station can apply for a postal or proxy vote in advance of the May polls.

From 1 April the clinically extremely vulnerable will no longer be advised to shield, but should continue to take extra precautions to protect themselves. The Electoral Commission has developed a [template letter](#) on voting at the May elections that electoral administrators can use to communicate with those who are clinically extremely vulnerable. The template is

designed to inform voters of the different ways they can choose to cast their vote, including postal and proxy voting, and the safety measures in place at polling stations, in order to support voters in making the right decision for them.

The Government has released clarified guidance to local authorities on COVID-19 data-sharing with regards to the May 2021 polls. NHS Digital's local authority [guidance pages](#) state that the COVID-19 data can be used for 'targeted communications about voting options for the May 2021 elections' but electoral canvassing and verification purposes are not permitted. This is reiterated in the guidance to local authorities.

Councils do not need to wait to receive this guidance in order to use the data in this way as NHS Digital's view is that this is permitted under the purposes in the current Terms of Release (hence the update to their own guidance page). Councils in receipt of the SPL are Independent Data Controllers and so do not need to seek explicit permission to do this; their own data-protection teams should refer to the relevant Terms of Release and guidance documentation and act accordingly. This allows targeted communications to those who are clinically extremely vulnerable, informing them of their voting options for the May elections.

Venues for polling stations and count locations

Use of schools as elections venues

The Government is working with partners to help to ensure that any disruption to children's education is kept to an absolute minimum whilst allowing Returning Officers to run polls effectively. Given the importance of avoiding any further disruption to education, schools should not be used where alternative venues are available. The use of schools is particularly discouraged where it would result in closure, and the Government has asked that Returning Officers work together with Head Teachers to explore all possibilities that would allow the school to remain open, such as by using only part of the premises, and taking adequate COVID-secure and safeguarding measures to allow pupils to remain on-site.

The Government is providing support to Returning Officers to explore the use of other community or commercial facilities, and to minimise disruption to schools where they are the only available option.

The Government appreciates however that in some cases the use of schools as polling stations is unavoidable.

Minimising disruption to schools

In cases where the use of schools as elections venues is unavoidable, the Returning Officers and local authorities involved should consider public health advice with regard to necessary cleaning and consider how this can be done efficiently to ensure minimal disruption. Additional funding is being provided, which may be used to meet the costs of additional measures to minimise disruption in schools and costs of cleaning, including any cleaning to take place after polls close so that schools can immediately reopen the following day.

The Public Health experts and Public Health England advise that the following measures would be broadly proportionate at handover points: ventilate any rooms used via full window and door opening to fresh outside air for at least 1 hour; and after ventilation, sanitise all hand touchpoints (e.g. door handles, rails, seats used by polling officers, desks). This would likely take around 1 hour, after the requisite ventilation time, for a small cleaning team in an average polling station.

Government support with securing venues

The Government recognises that there are challenges for Returning Officers in securing venues to act as polling stations, count locations and other electoral locations (for example, for the opening of postal votes). Some usual venues will not be suitable because of the difficulty in social distancing or because they are being used for other priority activities, such as for vaccinations. As set out above, schools should not be used where alternative venues are available and Returning Officers are also exploring options to minimise disruption to schools. The Government has provided additional funding to help address these issues and, in the [May 2021 polls Delivery Plan](#), committed to provide support to Returning Officers to explore the use of other community or commercial facilities.

The Government has offered to contact national chains to support Returning Officers with access to venues and to support them to source temporary structures where needed for the May polls.

Staffing for the May 2021 polls

COVID-vaccine rollout and elections staff

The Government is following the advice of independent experts at the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) on which groups of people to prioritise for COVID-19 vaccines. The JCVI has now published their interim advice on Phase 2 of the COVID-19 vaccination programme. The risks of poor outcomes from COVID-19 increase with age; JCVI therefore advises that the offer of vaccination during Phase 2 continues to prioritise people by age.

The Government welcomes the interim advice of the JCVI and the UK Government and the devolved administrations will follow the recommended approach, subject to the final advice given by the independent expert committee which will become available in due course.

We are taking steps to ensure the polling stations are COVID-secure for both staff and voters, as detailed above and in the Government's elections Delivery Plan. We are grateful for the tireless efforts of all our key workers, including elections staff, at this difficult time.

Government support with securing staff to deliver the polls

The Government's Delivery Plan for the May 2021 polls acknowledged that ensuring there are sufficient election workers to staff polling stations, counts and other electoral locations is

one of the major delivery challenges for the elections in May 2021. Within the plan, the Government committed to provide support to Returning Officers to identify sufficient staff.

The Government has engaged with the Electoral Commission, Local Government Association, District Councils Network, Association of Electoral Administrators and Solace on what support would offer the most value. As a result, Government support will be demanded, and will be targeted towards the challenge of recruiting staff, in particular helping administrators identify and access new sources of staff.

Accordingly, in a letter issued on 23 February to all Returning Officers in England, the Government's proposal for support with sourcing sufficient staff was set out, and Returning Officers were invited to request this support where it is needed. Calls for (paid) volunteers across England and Wales were issued to the National Citizen Service, to civil servants and to Job Centres. Returning Officers requiring additional support with staffing are now being put into contact with appropriate volunteers in their area.

The Government will continue to explore other potential sources of additional staff as required in the run up to the elections.

Funding

Funding available for local authorities for the May polls

In the Delivery Plan, the Government announced that further funding would be made available to specifically cover the additional COVID-related costs that will be incurred for the May 2021 polls. The Government is directly providing around £95 million for the running of the polls on 6 May which includes an additional allocation of around £32 million to take account of the extra costs of delivering the polls during the pandemic.

Additional funding for Police and Crime Commissioner elections

The funds necessary for undertaking the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) elections are payable out of the Consolidated Fund. The Cabinet Office is responsible for estimating the cost of running those polls and ensuring that the relevant funds are made available to Returning Officers for the 'efficient and effective running of the polls'. The funding allocations are based on previous expenditure in turn uplifted to reflect any changes since the last poll. The allocations will then be further uplifted to account for the additional costs of delivering the polls in a COVID-secure way.

Supplementary funding guidance has been provided to Returning Officers in relation to the PCC elections taking place on 6 May. In the unlikely event that the cost of running the polls exceeds the overall estimate, additional necessary costs will be considered as usual and can be reimbursed out of the Consolidated Fund, as provided for in legislation.

Methodology for the allocation of additional funding for local authority polls

Funding for the PCC elections is only one half of the position. Responsibility for funding local polls rests with the relevant local authority; Returning Officers are legally entitled to reimbursement for any necessary costs incurred for the delivery of the local polls.

We understand that local authorities are under serious financial pressure and, over the course of recent months, the government has made a total of £7.2 billion of additional funding available to them to support them in discharging their responsibilities in these uniquely challenging circumstances. As was noted by the Government in December 2020, that additional money can be used to support local elections. However, to further support local authorities, the Government announced in February an additional £15 million grant funding for local authorities in England to help deliver the local elections and cover the additional costs of COVID-secure polls. The Barnett formula will apply where relevant, meaning that our partners in the Welsh and Scottish Governments will also receive additional funding.

We have now finalised the methodology for allocating the additional funding to support the running of the local polls, alongside Police and Crime Commissioner allocations. We have considered a number of factors in determining how the funds should be allocated including the size of the electorate, number of polling stations, postal voters and the level of poll combination for each local authority area, in order to ensure a fair approach.

An update on the funding allocation methodology and the additional funding allocations has been communicated with local authorities and Returning Officers via the representative bodies and Police Area Returning Officers.

Nominations

Changes to the nominations process in light of COVID-19

It is important there remains a democratic check and balance for candidates to demonstrate a degree of local support from local electors in their area. However, while it is essential that candidates in a poll can demonstrate this, we must balance the importance of democracy with the need to protect people in these unique circumstances. The Government's focus has therefore been to put in place appropriate arrangements to reduce the amount of movement and person to person contact that might otherwise be necessary as part of the nominations process, and therefore reduce the risk of exposure to and transmission of COVID-19.

Statutory instruments have been made which make changes to the nomination process, reducing the number of signatures that potential candidates are required to collect for almost all types of poll due to be held on 6 May, including council elections, mayoral elections and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections. These provisions are time-limited; the elections next May (2022) will automatically revert to the standard rules.

The exact numbers of signatures required for each type of election is made clear in the [May 2021 elections - note on changes to the nominations process and number of subscribers required for nominations](#) which has been issued on gov.uk.

Collecting signatures for a candidate's nomination

Since 8 March, individual campaigners in England have been allowed to deliver leaflets or canvass electors in relation to the elections and local referendums taking place on 6 May and for any further by-elections and local referendums being held whilst COVID-19 related restrictions remain in place. Gatherings of two people are also permitted to enable participation in the nomination process (for example, signing nomination papers).

All individuals carrying out these activities should follow the guidance on [how to stop the spread of coronavirus](#) at all times. The number of campaigners operating together should be kept to an absolute minimum, and a minimum 2 metres distance should be maintained between them at all times. Campaigners should not enter a private home; they may speak to electors on their doorsteps, maintaining at least 2 metres distance at all times.

Campaigning

Campaigning in England ahead of the May polls

The Government has published clear [guidance](#) on COVID-secure campaigning for the May 21 elections in England, which will continue to be updated as necessary. Please see this guidance for further details.

Guidance for campaigning in England, Wales and Scotland

The guidance published on 26 February is for COVID-secure campaigning in England. Guidance has been published separately by the Welsh Government and the Scottish Government for campaigning in Wales and Scotland; and the UK Government, Welsh Government and Scottish Government will work together to ensure the ability to operate across boundaries of the constituent nations in a practicable manner.

It is essential that all those involved in campaigning follow the guidance for the relevant part of the UK they are campaigning in.

Campaigning in England ahead of the May polls

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Verification and the count

Making the counts COVID-secure

It is vital for free and fair elections that polls are transparent and effectively scrutinised. However, minimising the transmission of COVID-19 and protecting public health is a priority during these elections. A strong set of measures will therefore be in place to ensure every aspect of the polls are COVID-secure for voters, staff and observers.

It is expected that counts, like other aspects of these elections, may look and feel different to previous events and it is essential that all involved recognise the need to work together to support them taking place effectively and safely.

It is the responsibility of Returning Officers to manage the conduct of the count and to ensure that appropriate reasonable measures are taken to comply with COVID regulations and to allow fair scrutiny of the count. Returning Officers will want to put in place arrangements to allow the effective scrutiny of their counts while ensuring the count is COVID-secure for everyone present.

The Electoral Commission has issued [guidance](#) on the processes for verification and counting of votes in the context of the pandemic. The Government has worked with the Electoral Commission to ensure this guidance is up to date.

The Electoral Commission's guidance is clear that arrangements for staff and all those attending the verification and count should reflect national and local public health guidelines, with count venues set up to allow social distancing and with appropriate protective measures in place. This may include hand sanitiser, plus clear (perspex) screens, partitions or barriers as appropriate to separate the counting staff from those observing.

It is mandatory for poll workers and observers to wear a face covering in indoor count venues (unless a person is exempt or has a reasonable excuse).

All those involved in the electoral process must show social responsibility and ensure that public health is protected.

Handling of postal votes and ballot boxes

Advice from Public Health England remains that as long as all those working with or handling paper take care to only be present if they are well, avoid touching their faces, and regularly and frequently clean their hands, there is no need to quarantine ballot papers or postal votes before commencing the verification or count process. Elections staff are therefore advised to use hand sanitiser and wash hands regularly after handling ballot papers and postal votes.

Similarly, there is no requirement to quarantine ballot boxes. Elections staff are advised to wipe down the outside of ballot boxes at regular intervals through polling day and once polling stations are closed, and to follow hand hygiene advice in washing hands after handling the ballot boxes during the verification and count process.

Expectations for the timings of the count and announcement of results

Due to the additional measures in place to make the counts COVID-secure, it may be the case that each stage of the count will take longer than in previous years, and simultaneous

counting of different electoral areas or different polls may not be possible at all venues. In many cases, counting will take place over several days.

Returning Officers are advised by the Electoral Commission to discuss the specific arrangements in place for each count venue with agents, candidates and all those involved in the counts to ensure a shared understanding of what will happen in practice at each location.

The Government has every confidence in the ability of the Returning Officers to run these polls in a way that meets the highest standards of both public safety and democratic integrity.