

Introduction to referendum campaigning

This document is for campaigners who want to know more about referendums.

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Terms and expressions we use

We use '**must**' when we refer to a specific legal or regulatory requirement. We use '**should**' for items we consider to be minimum good practice, but which are not legal requirements.

You do not have to follow this guidance, but if you do, you will normally be doing enough to comply with the law.

Our approach to enforcement

If you do not comply with legal or regulatory requirements you or your organisation may be subject to civil or criminal sanctions. You can find more information about the Commission's approach to enforcement at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/party-finance/enforcement.

Introduction to referendum campaigning

Who this document is for:

People who would like to campaign in a referendum.

The document covers:

- An introduction to referendums
- What happens when a referendum is held
- Who can campaign at a referendum
- Being a registered campaigner
- Lead campaign groups

Related documents:

- [Overview of referendum spending](#)
- [Overview of donations for referendum campaigners](#)
- [Referendum specific guidance](#)
- [Situations and procedures – The designation process](#)

Forms and explanations

- [RC1 Application to register as a campaigner in a referendum](#)

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Summary

The active participation of campaigners is vital to a referendum's success.

If you would like to campaign, you need to know about how referendums are run and what rules you must follow.

This introduction will give you the key points about referendums and tell you where you can find more information.

Introduction

A referendum is an event where electors are asked to vote on a particular issue or proposal (in the form of a question).

For example, in 1975 a UK-wide referendum helped to determine whether the UK should remain as a member of the European Community.

There are two types of referendums:

- Referendums under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA referendums).
- Local government referendums. For example, whether or not to have an elected mayor in your area.

Different laws, rules and regulations apply to these types of referendum. We only regulate PERA referendums and this guidance only covers those.

If you want to know more about local government referendums, you will need to contact your local authority.

If you want to know whether any planned referendum is a PERA referendum, please call us or visit our website.

Important

This guidance does not apply to local government referendums as we do not regulate them.

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What happens when a referendum is held?

If a PPERA referendum is going to take place, legislation will be passed containing the proposed question and details about how it is to be run.

Before a referendum is held, there is a formal campaigning period called the 'referendum period'. During this period, rules on campaigning, spending and finances apply.

We publish a timetable showing the dates and deadlines for each referendum. And, from the first day of the referendum period, we start to register campaigners.

The timetable we publish will include the following information:

- When the referendum spending rules begin.
- What the spending limits are.
- The deadline for applying to us to be designated as a lead campaign group.
- The deadline by which electors must register to vote, including for postal votes.
- The deadlines for campaigners to report to us after the referendum.

After the referendum poll has closed, the votes are counted locally. The local results are then collated and the overall result announced.

What are our statutory responsibilities?

Under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) the Electoral Commission's responsibilities include:

- Commenting on the wording of the referendum question.
- Registering campaigners.
- Regulating campaign spending and donations.
- Designating lead campaign groups.
- Setting and administering the grants to lead campaign groups.
- Reporting on the administration of the referendum.
- The conduct of the referendum and ensuring the overall accuracy of the result.

For more information on referendums and how they are organised see:

- [Overview of referendum campaigns](#)

Who can campaign at a referendum?

Anyone can spend up to £10,000 on campaigning during the referendum period without registering with us.

If you want to spend more than this, you must register with us to become a 'registered campaigner'. We open the registers at the beginning of the referendum period.

You must tell us which side of the debate you are campaigning for.

You can register with us using the [RC1 form: Application to register as a campaigner in a referendum](#) on our website.

For more information on the rules and good practice about how you can campaign, see our [Referendum campaign dos and don'ts](#). These rules apply whether or not you have to register with us.

There are restrictions on the information which can be issued by public bodies during a referendum. See:

- [Expert paper: Public bodies and referendum material](#)

Who can register as a campaigner?

Only the following types of individuals or organisations can register as campaigners:

- An individual who is resident in the UK or registered on a UK electoral register.
- A UK-registered political party.
- A UK-registered company which is incorporated in the EU and carries on business in the UK.
- A UK-registered trade union.
- A UK-registered building society.
- A UK-registered limited liability partnership which carries on business in the UK.
- A UK-registered friendly, industrial, provident or building society.
- A UK-based unincorporated association that carries on the majority of its business or other activities in the UK.

Important

Even if you are already registered with us as a political or third party, you still need to register as a campaigner for each referendum.

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Being a registered campaigner

Registering as a campaigner gives you:

- A spending limit above £10,000.
- Access to the electoral register to help your campaign.
- The right for representatives to attend postal vote opening sessions, polling stations and the counting of the votes.

Referendum finance and spending

As a registered campaigner you must comply with rules on spending, donations and loans under the PPERA. These cover most campaigning activity.

You must register someone to be a 'responsible person'. This person will be responsible for making sure that these rules are followed.

You must also report your campaign's donations, loans and spending to us after the referendum.

'Loans' include guarantees, securities and credit facilities such as overdrafts and credit cards.

There are rules about who in your campaign can authorise spending.

Political parties

If you are a political party, your registered treasurer will be your 'responsible person'.

You must continue to report donations and loans every quarter as usual. You must submit a spending return after the referendum, but you do not need to submit any additional donation or loan returns.

You cannot make any donations or loans to other registered campaigners, except for a designated lead campaign group.

For more information, see this document:

- [An overview of referendum campaigns](#)

Lead campaign groups

Once you have registered, you can apply to us to become the lead campaign group (known as the 'designated organisation' in PPERA) for one side of the debate.

The benefits for lead campaign groups are:

- A higher spending limit than other registered campaigners.
- To be able to send information to voters free of charge.
- Referendum campaign broadcasts.
- Free use of certain public rooms.
- A grant from us.

We must make sure that the lead campaign groups adequately represent those campaigning for each outcome.

Because of this, if you want to apply for designation, you may want to consider forming an umbrella organisation with other groups who are campaigning for the outcome you support.

The umbrella organisation must be registered with us as a campaigner if your application is to be considered.

For more information on lead campaigners see:

- [Situations and Procedures – The designation process](#)

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How we can help

You can find more information in the guidance documents we have suggested in this document, or you can view our full range of guidance and up-to-date resources on our website.

If it's easier, you can also contact us on one of the phone numbers or email addresses below. We are here to help, so please get in touch.

Call us on:

- **England:** 0207 271 0616
pef@electoralcommission.org.uk
- **Scotland:** 0131 255 0200
infoscotland@electoralcommission.org.uk
- **Wales:** 0292 034 6800
infowales@electoralcommission.org.uk
- **Northern Ireland:** 0289 089 4020
infonorthernireland@electoralcommission.org.uk

Visit us at www.electoralcommission.org.uk

We welcome feedback on our guidance – just email us at:
pef@electoralcommission.org.uk

Translations and other formats

For information on obtaining this publication in another language or in a large-print or Braille version please contact the Electoral Commission:

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