

## Refreshing absent vote identifiers

### The timing of the first annual review and identifying the size of the 2012 refresh

1. The Electoral Registration Officer must, by 31 January each year, send every person who remains an absent voter and whose signature on the personal identifiers record is more than five years old a notice in writing:
  - requiring them to provide a fresh signature if they wish to remain an absent voter, and
  - informing them of the date on which they would cease to be entitled to vote by post or by proxy in the event of a failure or refusal to provide a fresh signature (i.e., six weeks from the date of the notice).
2. Absent voters who have been granted a waiver are not affected by the refresh provisions as they do not have a signature on the personal identifiers record.
3. The legislation requires that this process is carried out in January every year and does not provide any flexibility for this to be carried out at any alternative or additional points in the year.
4. The legislation requires the Electoral Registration Officer to carry out the first annual refresh of signatures by 31 January 2012. In order to ensure that the signatures for as many absent voters as possible are refreshed, producing as accurate a record as possible and potentially limiting the number of postal votes that are rejected due to mismatched identifiers, Electoral Registration Officers should send refresh notices in January 2012 to all those whose signatures are over five years old on 31 January 2012.
5. While notices may be sent at any point in January 2012, in each case the signature must be more than five years old on the date of the notice. Electoral Registration Officers may therefore decide to send all of the notices on 31 January 2012 or, alternatively, may decide to send notices out on more than one date in January 2012, with the last of the notices being sent out on 31 January 2012. For example, the Electoral Registration Officer may send notices on 20 January 2012 to all those absent voters whose signature on the personal identifiers record is more than five years old on that date, and then send notices on 31 January 2012 to the remainder of those absent voters whose signature is more than five years old on 31 January 2012. The Electoral Registration Officer may prepare the notices in advance so that they can be sent on the day they are dated. The Electoral Registration Officer will need to calculate the other dates linked to the refresh process based on the date of the notice.

6. Not all absent voters will be subject to refresh in January 2012. Where the Electoral Registration Officer sends refresh notices to all those whose signatures are over five years old on 31 January 2012, the refresh will cover all electors who remain absent voters and had provided their personal identifiers to the Electoral Registration Officer between 1 and 30 January 2007 (i.e., those who were existing absent voters in 2007 and returned the notice requesting their identifiers on or before 30 January 2007, and those who made a new absent vote application between 1 and 30 January 2007).
7. The next refresh exercise after January 2012 will be in January 2013. Where the Electoral Registration Officer sends refresh notices in 2012 to all those whose signatures are over five years old on 31 January 2012, the 2013 refresh will cover those absent voters whose signatures on the personal identifiers record will become more than five years old between 31 January 2012 and 30 January 2013. This will cover those who were existing absent voters in 2007 but did not return the notice requesting their identifiers until on or after 31 January 2007, and those who made a new absent vote application between 31 January 2007 and 30 January 2008.
8. The Electoral Registration Officer should determine the age of the signature based on:
  - the date of the signature the voter originally provided, or
  - if the signature is undated, the date that the Electoral Registration Officer received the original signature, or
  - if the signature is undated and the Electoral Registration Officer does not have a record of the date on which the signature was received, the date the signature was scanned into the electoral management system in order to be added to the personal identifier record.
9. If an absent voter has submitted a new signature to replace an existing signature at any point, the age of the signature is calculated based on the latest signature provided.
10. The Electoral Registration Officer should identify the likely size of the refresh exercise as soon as possible by reviewing the personal identifiers record to estimate the numbers of signatures that will be subject to the refresh process in January 2012. This will enable planning for the exercise to be undertaken and captured in project planning and risk register documentation.
11. As part of the planning process, consideration will need to be given as to what resources will be required to carry out the exercise, including whether any additional staff will be required, particularly bearing in mind the proximity of this work to the scheduled May 2012 elections, and whether the necessary technology is in place to support the process. The design, printing and distribution of the notices will also be a key consideration. Additionally, Electoral Registration Officers should consider how best to inform electors about the process as part of their public awareness strategy.

## Collection of date of birth

12. The date of birth is not part of the refresh process as set out in legislation. Existing absent voters **do not** need to provide their date of birth again in order for their absent vote to continue.
13. If the Electoral Registration Officer does include a space for the date of birth to be provided in the notice requesting a new signature, it should be made clear in the notice that a failure to re-submit their date of birth will not affect their absent voting arrangements. There is no provision for the date of birth held by the Electoral Registration Officer to be pre-printed on the notice.

## Sending the notice

14. By 31 January 2012, Electoral Registration Officers should send a notice to all postal, proxy and postal proxy voters whose signature on the personal identifiers record is more than five years old. The notice should request them to supply a specimen of their signature, and explain that if this is not received within six weeks of the date of the notice (for example, on or before 12 March 2012 where the notice is dated 31 January 2012), their absent voting facility will be cancelled. The notice must be dated, and the Electoral Registration Officer should maintain a record of the name of each absent voter to whom a notice is sent, the address to which the notice is sent and the date of the notice.
15. The Electoral Registration Officer is required to send the notice to the current or last known address of the absent voter and must enclose a pre-addressed pre-paid postage reply envelope with every request made to a UK-based absent voter. Notices sent to absent voters with non-UK addresses must be sent with a pre-addressed reply envelope but there is no requirement to include pre-paid postage.
16. Along with or in the notice, the Electoral Registration Officer should also explain:
  - how the required personal identifiers are used and how the personal identifiers assist in deterring misuse of the entitlement to vote
  - that failure or refusal to provide a new signature will result in the cancellation of their absent vote
  - the details of the absent vote currently in place for that elector and the types of elections the absent voter would cease to be entitled to an absent vote at should they fail to provide the required signature
  - that cancellation of the absent vote for failure or refusal to supply a new sample signature does not prevent the elector re-applying for an absent vote at a later date
  - the circumstances in which the signature requirement may be waived
  - the deadline for the elector to provide their signature (i.e., by six weeks from the date of the notice (for example, 12 March 2012 if the notice is dated 31 January 2012))

## Reminder notice

17. If an absent voter who has been sent a notice has not responded within three weeks of the original notice date (for example, by 21 February 2012 if the original notice is dated 31 January 2012), they must be sent a reminder notice.
18. Returned notices will need to have been registered or scanned in to the system in order to enable the production of an accurate list of those electors who need to be sent a reminder notice.
19. The reminder notice should contain all of the contents of the original notice.
20. Those who send back a notice without a signature or without a signature that meets the requirement for a signature (details of which can be found on page 2 of Part G of [Managing electoral registration in Great Britain](#)) should also be sent a reminder notice, which in these cases should also state that either no signature had been provided or that the signature provided could not be accepted and so another signature should be provided.
21. Any absent voter who cancels their absent voting arrangement in response to the original notice should not be sent a reminder notice.

## Failure to return the notice or reminder notice

22. If the Electoral Registration Officer has not received the correctly completed original notice or reminder notice with the required signature within six weeks of the date of the original notice (for example, by 12 March 2012 if the original notice is dated 31 January 2012), the absent vote facility **must** be removed from the absent voting records and lists. The absent vote must be deleted on the day after the deadline (for example, where the original notice was dated 31 January 2012, the deadline for response would be 12 March 2012, and the date for deletion of the entry would be 13 March 2012).
23. The absent voter must then be informed in writing that their absent vote has been removed. This applies equally where a voter has notified the Electoral Registration Officer that they refuse to provide a signature as where an absent voter has failed to respond to the notice or reminder notice.
24. The Electoral Registration Officer must send each absent voter removed from the absent vote records and lists a removal notice which:
  - explains that their absent vote has been removed, and so they must personally attend a polling station in order to vote,
  - informs them of the likely location of the polling station allotted to them, and
  - reminds them that they may make a fresh absent vote application, which must include their identifiers. A new application form should be included with the removal notice. The date of birth the Electoral Registration Officer already holds for the elector may not be pre-printed on the new application form.

25. A returned notice must contain a signature in the format required for scanning and therefore must meet the test that applies to all new absent vote applications (as referred to in paragraph 20 above). If a returned signature does not meet the test, or the returned notice is blank, it should be treated as a failure to return the notice. In these cases, a reminder notice, or further reminder notice, should be sent if there is time left for completion, otherwise a new absent vote application should be sent, unless the absent voter has indicated that they do not wish to retain their absent vote.
26. Where an absent voter refuses or fails to provide a fresh signature within six weeks of the date of the original notice, the Electoral Registration Officer must remove that absent voter's entry from the postal voters list, list of proxies or proxy postal voters list (as the case may be). The Electoral Registration Officer must also remove that person's entry from the relevant absent vote record.
27. Should an absent voter's entries on the above lists and records be required to be removed, the removal will take effect immediately. The exception to this is where the deletion would take place during an election. If an absent voter's entry is due to be removed after a copy of the postal voting list, proxy postal voters list or list of proxies has been made available for inspection or sent to a Returning Officer after 5pm on the sixth day before the day of the poll, the removal will not take effect until after the election. Any postal vote pack that has already been dispatched to an absent voter whose entry is removed before 5pm on the sixth day before the day of the poll must be cancelled and any returned ballot paper must be retrieved and not allowed to go forward to the count.
28. Where a postal proxy is removed from the record and list of postal proxies, the Electoral Registration Officer must write to the elector and explain that while the proxy appointment remains in place, their proxy must now attend the elector's polling station to vote on their behalf.
29. The Electoral Registration Officer should also write to any proxy or postal proxy where the elector has failed to respond to the request notices to inform them that their proxy or postal proxy appointment has been cancelled.

### Return of the notice or reminder notice after the deadline

30. Any notice or reminder notice that is received after the deadline of within six weeks after the date of the original notice (for example, on or after 13 March 2012 if the original notice is dated 31 January 2012) cannot be used to add the previous absent voter back onto the relevant absent voter record.
31. When such a notice is received after the absent voter has been removed, the elector should be sent a letter explaining that the notice cannot be accepted. This letter should be accompanied by a new absent vote application, which will require the applicant to provide both of their identifiers. Again, the date of birth the Electoral Registration Officer already holds for the elector should not be pre-printed on the new application form.

## Receiving a completed notice or reminder notice within the deadline

32. On receipt of a completed notice or reminder notice the Electoral Registration Officer should update the personal identifiers record by replacing the old signature with the fresh signature.
33. The Electoral Registration Officer is required by law to keep a record of all signatures for 12 months from the date on which a person is removed from the record of granted applications for absent voting or for 12 months from the date of the poll for the purposes of which the person's application for an absent vote was granted.