

# Introduction to registering a political party

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This document is for people who are thinking of setting up a political party and want to know where to start.

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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 <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/party-finance/enforcement>

# Introduction to registering a political party

## Who this document is for:

People who are thinking about setting up a political party.

## The document covers:

- Introduction to the Electoral Commission
- The register of political parties
- Who can stand at election
- Official roles within a party or group
- Who can register with us
- The structure of your party
- Choosing a party name, description and emblem
- What next?

## Related documents:

- [Overview of party names, descriptions and emblems](#)
- [Overview of maintaining party details](#)
- [Process for registering a political party](#)

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## Summary

If you are thinking about setting up a political party, you may need to register with us. If you do, you'll need to follow some rules.

This document explains when and how to register with us, outlines the basic rules you'll need to follow and tells you where to find more information.

If you'd like help or advice at any point, please call us. We're here to help you.

# Introduction

## The Electoral Commission – Who we are

We are an independent body set up by the UK Parliament. Our aim is integrity and public confidence in the democratic process.

We:

- Register political parties and regulate party compliance under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA)
- Maintain the register of political parties in Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- Set the standards for electoral registration and running elections, and report on how well this is done
- Run any referendums held under PERA
- Publish details of where parties and other election campaigners get money from and how they spend it
- Make sure people understand and follow the rules on party and election finance
- Make sure people understand it is important to register to vote, and know how to vote

## A healthy democracy

Political parties and campaigners are vital to a healthy democracy and we encourage participation.

There are lots of ways that you can get involved. From joining an existing party or interest group, to standing for election as an independent candidate or setting up a political party of your own.

## Setting up a political party

If you are thinking of setting up a political party, you may need to register with us and follow the rules.

This guidance will take you through when and how to register, gives an outline of the basic rules and tells you where you can find more information.

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## The register of political parties

There are two registers of political parties in the UK, one for Great Britain (GB) and one for Northern Ireland (NI). We maintain both the Great Britain and the Northern Ireland registers.

These registers contain the details of all political parties registered to contest elections in England, Scotland and Wales (GB register) and Northern Ireland (NI register).

Parties on the GB register also select which parts of Great Britain they want to be registered in. Parties can choose a combination of England, Scotland or Wales.

As an overview, the registered entries for political parties show:

- the party name and head office address
- the party emblems
- the party descriptions
- the party officers' names

To see what a registered party's registered entry looks like, visit [PEF Online](#)

### Why register?

The main benefit of registering is that your party name, description and emblem can appear on the ballot papers.

If you are not registered, your candidates can only be described as 'Independent' (or 'Annibynnol' in Wales).

Also, once you have registered your name with us, no other party can register this name or a confusingly similar name. This is to stop voters mistaking one party for another on the ballot paper.

## Who can stand at election?

### Independent candidates and groups

Independent candidates or groups tend to represent their local constituency or local issues. They can contest local authority, devolved, national or European elections.

Independent candidates or groups do not need to register with us. However, if they do, they can use their group's identity marks on election ballot papers. If they don't register with us, they can only use 'Independent' (or 'Annibynnol' in Wales).

Under PPERA, independent candidates have no party reporting responsibilities, but they must report their election spending and donations to local Returning Officers after the election.

### Types of political party

There are two types of political party that can stand for election. These are:

- Registered political parties
- Minor political parties

#### Registered political parties

Registered political parties are set up to contest local authority, devolved, national or European elections.

They can be registered as political parties on the Great Britain register, the Northern Ireland register or both. And, depending on which registers they appear on, they can contest elections in Great Britain, Northern Ireland or both.

Under PPERA, registered political parties must comply with financial regulations and reporting requirements.

These rules include continuous donation and loan controls, spending controls during regulated elections, annual accounts reporting and annual registration confirmation.

For information on party emblems, see:

- [Overview of party names, descriptions and emblems](#)

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## Your responsibilities as a political party

Under PPERA, a registered political party must:

- make sure all donations and loans over £500 come from mainly UK-based sources
- report donations and loans every quarter, and report weekly during a general election
- keep to campaign spending limits at elections, and report campaign spending to us
- keep accurate accounts and records
- send us annual accounts
- if the party's income or expenditure is over £250,000 a year, you must also send an auditors' report
- keep the party's details up to date with us, and confirm them annually

These rules are to ensure the integrity and transparency of party political finance. If you don't follow them, you may be subject to fines or other enforcement action. In some cases, this can include a referral for criminal prosecution.

You have significant responsibilities as a political party, so it's important that you understand these fully before you register with us.

### Minor parties

Minor parties are smaller parties that only contest parish council elections (England) and community council elections (Wales).

They are registered on the Great Britain register.

Under PPERA, minor parties are not subject to the financial controls that registered political parties must comply with. They do not need to appoint a party treasurer and only have to submit an annual registration confirmation. The information they need to submit when registering with us is also much less detailed.

### Your responsibilities as a minor party

Minor parties have far fewer responsibilities than a registered political party. They must:

- Submit an annual registration confirmation to us

For more information on donations and loans, see:

- [Overview of donations to political parties](#)
- [Overview of loans to political parties](#)

 Important

If you are **only** going to stand at parish or community council elections, it's best to register as a minor party. You can always apply to change your status to a registered political party at a later date if you wish.

If you would like to register as a minor party, please call us. We will give you some advice and explain how to make an application.

 **Important**

If you are thinking of registering as a minor party, please call us.

## What official roles are needed in a political party or group?

Registered political parties or groups must appoint people to certain official roles. There are three main roles. As a brief overview, these are:

### Party leader

The party leader does not have any direct responsibilities under PPERA. They lead the party. However, if the party does not have a treasurer at any time, the leader becomes responsible for making sure the party complies with PPERA.

### Party treasurer

The party treasurer is legally responsible for making sure their party complies with PPERA and looks after the party's finances. The party treasurer is also the person who we will usually be in contact with about your party.

### Nominating officer

The nominating officer does not have any direct responsibilities under PPERA but they do have responsibilities under the Representation of the People Act 1983. A nominating officer is responsible for authorising candidates to stand on behalf of the party.

For more information on party treasurers, see:

- [Introduction to being a party treasurer](#)

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## Who can register with us?

We register two types of party – political parties and minor parties.

### Which registers can parties appear on?

#### Political parties

Political parties can apply to be registered on the Great Britain (GB) register, the Northern Ireland (NI) register, or both.

#### Minor political parties

Minor parties can only appear on the Great Britain register.

### Which register should you apply to appear on?

The registers for Great Britain (GB) and Northern Ireland (NI) are separate. Before you apply, you should think carefully about which register you want to appear on.

You should only apply to appear on both registers if you believe that you will stand for elections in Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

If you do apply for both registers, you must keep the finances of each party separate. You will also need to submit separate accounts, donations and loans reports for Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

If you apply for the GB register, you can choose which parts of Great Britain you want to be registered in. You can choose any combination of England, Scotland or Wales. There is no need to register for all three, only the parts where you want to contest elections.

#### Important

There are separate reporting obligations for the GB and NI registers. You must be able to comply with these if you choose to go on both.

## Registering your party

Before you can register your party, you'll need to get a few things in place and make some important decisions.

Some of these are:

- Decide what type of party best suits your aims and objectives
- Agree your official roles
- Decide your party name, descriptions and emblems (party identity marks)
- Decide the parts of the UK that you want to register to contest elections in
- Agree the financial structure of the party

For more information on party identity marks, see:

- [Overview of party names, descriptions and emblems](#)

### Registered political parties

Your party will need to appoint people to certain official roles.

These are:

- A party leader – who will lead the party
- A party treasurer – who will be responsible for your party's compliance with the financial rules
- A nominating officer – who will authorise candidates to stand for election and use the party name on ballot papers

The same person can take on one or more of the roles above, but you must register at least two different people with us as party officers. If one person has all three official roles, you must register someone as an additional officer.



**Important**

If you want to, you can also appoint someone to be your campaigns officer. A campaigns officer carries out the treasurer's responsibilities for party spending at elections and referendums. The campaigns officer and the treasurer cannot be the same person.

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## Minor political parties

As a minor political party, you will need a party leader and one additional officer to carry out the official roles.

## The structure of your party

### Your party's constitution

As part of your application, you will need to send us your party's constitution. This will usually cover things like how your party is organised and how it carries out business.

We use your constitution to check if there is anything in it which will conflict with your financial scheme under PPERA. For example, how your accounts are signed off.

There are no requirements about what your party's constitution should set out, but you may want to include the following:

- your party's aims and objectives
- the structure of your party – for example, if you have branches
- how the party is run – for example, the frequency of meetings and how decisions are made
- what officers you have and what their responsibilities are
- if you have membership requirements

### Your financial scheme

Before you apply, you will need to put together a financial scheme.

Your financial scheme demonstrates how your party will comply with the legal requirements of party and election finances under PPERA.

For more information, see:

- [Political party application and registration](#)

Your scheme should include procedures for:

- accounting records
- handling donations and loans
- maintaining your registered details with us
- authorising and reporting on campaign spending

We produce a [template scheme](#) that you can use as a base document to create your party's own financial scheme.

You do not have to use this scheme, but it includes all the relevant areas you will need to consider. If you are appointing a campaigns officer, or if your party will have accounting units, this scheme is **not** suitable. We can provide you with appropriate schemes, so please call us.

## Creating a single central party, or a central party with accounting units

Financially, most parties operate as a single unit (called the central party). However, if you have a large party, or your party is geographically spread out, you may want to set up party 'branches'.

These branches are called 'accounting units' (AU). They are sections of a party whose finances are not managed by a party's headquarters.

Accounting units are responsible for managing their own donations and loans, reporting to the central party, and submitting their unit's annual accounts to us.

Each accounting unit must have their own treasurer and second officer. When you apply, you will need to tell us if you plan to have accounting units.

For more information on party treasurers, see:

- [Introduction to being a party treasurer](#)

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## Choosing a party name, descriptions and emblems

As part of your registration, you must choose a party name.

You can also register:

- Up to 12 party descriptions
- Up to 3 emblems

### Party names and descriptions

If you feel it is appropriate, you can register your name and descriptions in Welsh, Irish or another language as well as English.

Under PPERA, party names and party descriptions are limited to six words each. This is to stop ballot papers becoming cluttered with long party names and descriptions.

For more information, see:

- [Overview of party names, descriptions and emblems](#)
- [Political party application and registration](#)

## What names and descriptions can't we register?

As a brief guide, we cannot register names and descriptions that:

- are longer than six words
- are similar to another party's name and therefore likely to confuse voters
- are obscene or offensive
- are likely to amount to an offence
- contain certain prohibited words – for example, 'None of the above' is not allowed

## Party emblems

You will be able to use your emblem on ballot papers at certain elections. Under PPERA, we can only register a black and white representation of your emblem.

You can have coloured emblems for your party, but the emblem you send us to register (and appear on the register) should be purely black and white.

## What emblems can't we register?

As a brief guide, we cannot register an emblem that:

- is similar to another party's and likely to confuse voters with another registered party
- is obscene or offensive
- is likely to amount to an offence – for example, an emblem that shows an illegal, immoral or criminal image is not allowed
- contains certain prohibited words – for example, an emblem containing just the word 'British' is not allowed
- is any colour other than black and white

For more information on what can and cannot be registered, see:

- [Overview of party names, descriptions and emblems](#)

## What next?

If you have decided that you still want to register your party and you have made all your decisions, you are ready to apply.

We recommend that you now read the following documents:

[Overview of party names, descriptions and emblems](#)

[Political party application and registration](#)

These documents will explain the rules and process of registration in more detail. You will then have all the information you need to make the correct application decisions.

## 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: 020 7271 0616  
[pef@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:pef@electoralcommission.org.uk)
- Scotland: 0131 225 0200  
[infoscotland@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:infoscotland@electoralcommission.org.uk)
- Wales: 029 2034 6800  
[infowales@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:infowales@electoralcommission.org.uk)
- Northern Ireland: 028 9089 4020  
[infonorthernireland@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:infonorthernireland@electoralcommission.org.uk)

Visit us at [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

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