

The Electoral Commission

Media Handbook

Northern Ireland Assembly election

Thursday 5 May 2016

March 2016

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Websites

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The Commission's website has a dedicated section for journalists featuring the Electoral Commission's news and views – including our press releases and statements. Our website has information on political party donations in the run-up to the election and has a 'Guidance' area with information for candidates. There is also information on organisations that the Commission is working in partnership with to raise public awareness of voter registration.

www.eoni.org.uk

The website of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland provides information on how to register to vote, absent voting, how to find your polling station and electoral identification requirements.

www.aboutmyvote.co.uk

This website provides information for the public on how to register and vote.

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Northern Ireland Assembly election 2016

1. What elections are taking place on Thursday 5 May 2016?

1.1 On Thursday 5 May 2016 there will be an election to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In addition, there will be elections to the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales. There are also Police and Crime Commissioner elections, local elections and mayoral elections happening across England as well as Greater London Authority elections in London.

2. Who's who at the Northern Ireland Assembly election and what are their responsibilities?

2.1 The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

The Chief Electoral Officer, Graham Shields, administers elections and compiles the register of electors in Northern Ireland. He has responsibility for the organisation and conduct of the election – including nominations, distribution of poll cards and postal ballots, the conduct of the poll and the counting of votes. The Chief Electoral Officer is supported in his duties by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

2.2 The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) aims to ensure the smooth running of elections and referendums in Northern Ireland while maintaining an impartial independent electoral service.

EONI comprises a headquarters in Belfast and eight area electoral offices across Northern Ireland. An Area Electoral Officer manages each office and acts under the supervision of the Chief Electoral Officer.

EONI recognises the important role that the media provide in communicating with the wider public and getting key messages out to voters.

2.3 Deputy Returning Officer

For the Northern Ireland Assembly election the Chief Electoral Officer has appointed 9 Deputy Returning Officers to manage two constituencies.

2.4 Presiding Officers

The Chief Electoral Officer appoints Presiding Officers to run polling stations. Duties include organising the layout of the polling station, supervising poll clerks, issuing ballot papers, assisting voters and ensuring that ballot boxes are transported securely to the count venue.

2.5 The Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission is an independent body set up by the UK Parliament.

At the election, we are responsible for:

- producing guidance for parties that are campaigning at the election
- producing guidance for non-party campaigners that are campaigning at the election
- registering political parties
- regulating where political parties and candidates get their money from and how they spend it
- promoting public awareness of the election and how to take part in it; and
- reporting on the conduct of the election

3. Northern Ireland Assembly election 2016

Event	Date
Publication of notice of election	Wednesday 30 March
Deadline for candidates to deliver nomination papers	1pm on Tuesday 12 April
Deadline for withdrawals	1pm on Tuesday 12 April
Publication of statement of persons nominated	Not later than 6pm on Tuesday 12 April (or as soon as possible thereafter)
Deadline for applying for a postal or proxy vote	5pm on Thursday 14 April
Deadline to register to vote	Monday 18 April

Event	Date
Polling day	7am to 10pm on Thursday 5 May
Verification of 'unused' ballot papers	As soon as practicable after 10pm on Thursday 5 May
Verification of used ballot papers (the opening of ballot boxes)	8am on Friday 6 May
Count commences	Following verifications on Friday 6 May
Deadline for submission of candidates spending returns to the Returning Officer	Must be received within 35 days of the declaration of the result. (e.g. If the declaration of the result is 6 May 2016 the deadline would be 10 June 2016)
Deadline for parties that have spent £250,000 or under to submit campaign spending returns to the Electoral Commission	Friday 5 August 2016
Deadline for non-party campaigners who have spent £10,000 or under to submit campaign spending returns to the Electoral Commission	Friday 5 August 2016
Deadline for political parties that spent over £250,000 to submit campaign spending returns to the Electoral Commission	Saturday 5 November 2016

Section A – Candidates

4.1 Who can become a candidate?

Anyone who wants to stand at the Northern Ireland Assembly election must be:

- at least 18 years old on the day of nomination; and
- a British or Irish citizen, an eligible Commonwealth citizen, or a citizen of any other member state of the European Union.

A candidate at the Northern Ireland Assembly election is not required to be registered as an elector or live in the constituency in which they wish to stand.

4.2 Are there any rules barring a candidate from standing?

The law disqualifies certain people from being a candidate or a MLA. Anyone who thinks they may be disqualified should consider seeking legal advice.

A person is disqualified from being a candidate if they are serving a prison sentence of more than one year anywhere in the UK or the Republic of Ireland. Certain people may not be disqualified from standing as a candidate but would be disqualified from taking their seat as a member of the Assembly. These include:

- civil servants, members of police forces or members of the armed forces
- members of the National Criminal Intelligence Service or National Crime Squad
- members of the UK Parliament or Dáil Éireann
- those who are the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order made by a court in England, Wales or Northern Ireland (though bankruptcy in itself is not a disqualification); or, their estate has been sequestered by a court in Scotland and they have not been discharged
- those who have been convicted of an imprisonable offence and are detained for more than a year, as defined under the Representation of the People Act 1981
- those who have been found or reported guilty of a corrupt or an illegal electoral practice within the past five or three years respectively

For more information on standing as a candidate at the Northern Ireland Assembly election see the Electoral Offices Guidance for Candidates and Agents at:

<http://www.eoni.org.uk/Elections/Information-for-candidates-and-agents>

4.3 How does someone become a candidate at the Northern Ireland Assembly Election?

Prospective constituency candidates at the Northern Ireland Assembly election, must submit the following to their Deputy Returning Officer by 1pm on 12 April 2016:

- a completed nomination, home address and consent to nominations forms
- a deposit of £150

To stand on behalf of a registered political party, the party must be registered on the Commission's register of Northern Ireland political parties (at <http://search.electoralcommission.org.uk>).

Candidates standing on behalf of a party will also need to submit:

- a certificate of authorisation from the party that allows them to use the party name, description and emblem on the ballot paper
- a written request to use one of the party's registered emblems (optional)

Candidates not standing on behalf of a party may use the description 'Independent' or no description at all, and cannot use an emblem.

4.4 How can we know who all of the candidates are?

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland will publish the full list of candidates standing at www.eoni.org.uk. This will happen by 6pm on Tuesday 12 April (or as soon as practicable thereafter).

5. Campaigning at the election

5.1 What can candidates say about one another during the Northern Ireland Assembly election campaign?

As at all elections, it is illegal to make a false statement about the personal character of a candidate in order to affect their election. Rules about defamation also apply to election materials.

The police may investigate allegations of the specific electoral offence of making a false statement. Defamation issues are a matter for the civil courts.

As with all elections, the Electoral Commission does not have any regulatory role in relation to the content of campaign material or what candidates say about each other.

5.2 Are there any electoral rules regarding campaign materials?

Yes, by law, candidates must use “imprints” on all their printed campaign material.

5.3 What is an “imprint”?

All printed material (i.e. posters, placards and leaflets) must include the name and address of the printer and promoter (the person who authorised the material to be printed). This is so that electors can be clear about the source of the campaign material. It is an offence not to include an imprint on election material.

The Electoral Commission also recommends that candidates, wherever possible, place an imprint on their electronic materials (i.e. websites, emails and social media platforms), but this is not a legal requirement.

5.4 Can candidates see the electoral register?

Yes. Candidates (once they officially become one) are entitled to receive, free of charge, a copy of the full electoral register and the lists of people voting by post or proxy (the absent voters’ lists) for the constituency that they are contesting.

Candidates can only use the full electoral register to help them campaign and to check that donations they receive come from a permissible source.

5.5 Do candidates get free delivery of leaflets?

Yes. Each candidate is entitled to free postage on one election communication sent to electors in the constituency.

Candidates should contact [Royal Mail](#) directly to make the arrangements for their leaflets.

6. Campaign spending limits and rules on accepting donations

The rules on spending apply to candidates spending on activities to promote their candidacy (or criticise other candidates) in the run-up to the election.

6.1 What activities count towards the spending limit at the Northern Ireland Assembly election?

Candidate spending includes any expenses incurred, whether on goods, services, property or facilities, for the purposes of the candidate's election during the regulated period. These activities include:

- advertising of any kind - for example, posters, newspaper adverts, websites or YouTube videos
- unsolicited materials sent to voters - for example, letters or leaflets
- transport costs
- public meetings
- staff costs - for example, an agent's salary
- accommodation - for example, the campaign office
- administrative costs - for example, telephone bills, stationery and photocopying.

6.2 Are there any activities that don't count towards the spending limit?

Yes. Activities that do not count include:

- anything (except adverts) appearing in a newspaper or on a licensed broadcast channel
- volunteer time including time spent by staff that is not paid for
- someone's main residence
- someone's personal car or other means of transport
- general computer equipment bought for personal use
- a candidate's deposit.

6.3 What is the regulated period for candidate spending?

The regulated period for the Northern Ireland Assembly election in 2016 begins the day after a person officially become a candidate. The earliest date this could be is 29 March 2016, and ends on polling day, 5 May 2016.

6.4 What is the spending limit for candidates?

The expenditure limits for Northern Ireland Assembly election candidates is:

Fixed Amount	Variable amount
£8,700	Plus 6p per registered parliamentary elector in a borough constituency, OR Plus 9p per registered parliamentary elector in a county constituency

The constituencies of Belfast East, Belfast North, Belfast South and Belfast West are borough constituencies. All other constituencies in Northern Ireland are county constituencies.

The expenditure limits for joint candidates are lower. Joint candidates normally contest the election for the same party in one constituency. If there are two candidates the limit is reduced by one quarter per candidate. If there are two or more candidates the limit is reduced by one third per candidate.

6.5 Is there a limit on donations a candidate can accept in the election?

No. However, candidates can only accept donations of money, items or services worth more than £50 towards their campaign spending if they are from a permissible source.

All donations worth more than £50 must be published in the candidate's spending return. They do not need to individually declare donations with a value of £50 or less, although they must give the total amount of donations with a value of up to £50 they have received.

6.6 Who can make donations to candidates?

Anyone can make a donation worth less than £50 to candidates.

Candidates must ensure they only accept donations of more than £50 from a permissible source. Donations that are not from a permissible source must be returned to the donor within 30 days. After that, the donation may be forfeited.

Permissible donors are defined as:

- an individual on a UK electoral register
- a GB registered political party
- a UK registered company which is incorporated within 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
- a UK registered friendly society
- a UK based unincorporated association

6.7 Can you view a candidates spending return?

Candidates must complete and return a spending return to the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland no later than 35 working days after the result for their constituency has been declared.

Candidates spending returns are available for public inspection. You should contact the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland for more information and/or to make an appointment.

For an overview of the rules and more detail on what counts as a donation and accepting donations, see Electoral Commission guidance for candidates and agents, http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/194109/Candidate-Guide-Northern-Ireland-Assembly-May-2016.pdf

Section B – Political parties

7. Campaign spending limits, donations and what must be reported

7.1 What is the spending limit for parties?

Political parties have a maximum spending limit of £306,000 if they contest every constituency in Northern Ireland. There are 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland. A party's spending limit is based on a limit of £17,000 per constituency that they contest. Parties do not have to attribute their spending between constituencies.

For more information on party spending limits see the Electoral Commission Guidance, Northern Ireland Assembly Election May 2016: Political parties http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/192966/Northern-Ireland-Assembly-Election-May-2016-Political-parties.pdf

7.2 When is the regulated period for political parties?

The regulated period for the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election, begins on 5 January 2016 and ends on polling day, 5 May 2016.

7.3 What activities count as spending?

Activities included in campaign spending are:

- advertising of any kind. For example, street banners, websites or YouTube videos
- unsolicited material sent to voters. For example, letters or leaflets that aren't in response to specific queries
- the manifesto and other documents setting out a party's policies
- market research or other methods of finding out how people intend to vote
- press conferences or other dealings with the media
- rallies and events, including the cost of people's attendance, and any goods, services or facilities provided
- transport in connection with publicising the campaign

If a party is entitled to a party election broadcast then the production costs must be included as campaign spending. The value of the airtime does not need to be included.

7.4 What doesn't count as spending?

Activities not included in campaign spending are:

- permanent, fixed term or temporary staff costs where the staff member has a direct employment contract with the party
- volunteer time
- office running costs, except costs that are higher than usual because of campaigning, such as telephone bills
- people's travel, food and accommodation costs while they campaign, unless they are reimbursed
- expenses met out of public funds. For example, security costs for VIP visits
- material sent only to your members
- party conferences
- local newsletters about elected representatives or prospective candidates
- anything a candidate properly declares on their spending return
- regional party list candidates' deposits

7.5 Is there a limit on donations that a political party can accept in the run up the Northern Ireland Assembly election?

No. However, parties can only accept donations worth more than £500 towards their campaign from a permissible source.

Political parties central HQs must continue to report any donations they receive on a quarterly basis that total over £7,500 to the Electoral Commission. Local accounting units must report donations that total over £1,500.

The Electoral Commission, as legally required in Northern Ireland, currently does not publish this information. The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 includes provisions that will allow for some information to be published in the future.

For more information on donations, including guidance on what is a permissible source, see the Electoral Commissions guidance on reporting donation and loans in Northern Ireland: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/party-or-campaigner/guidance-for-political-parties/reporting-donations-and-loans-northern-ireland>

Section C – Non-party campaigners

8. Rules for non-party campaigners

8.1 What organisations or individuals will be classed as non-party campaigners at the Northern Ireland Assembly election?

Non-party campaigners are individuals or organisations that campaign in the run-up to elections, but are not standing as political parties or candidates.

8.2 When is the regulated period?

The regulated period for the Northern Ireland Assembly election began on 5 January 2016, and will end on polling day, 5 May 2016.

8.3 What types of non-party campaigns are there?

There are two types of non-party campaigns. These are:

- **Local campaigns:** non-party campaigns for or against one or more candidates in a particular constituency.
- **General campaigns:** non-party campaigns for or against a political party, or particular categories of candidate, including campaigns on policies or issues closely associated with a particular party or category of candidates (for example, candidates in a certain age group).

The Electoral Commission regulates general campaigns only.

Local campaigns are regulated by the Police under the Northern Ireland Assembly (Elections) Order 2001 as amended. Complaints about breaches of the rules that apply to local campaigns should be made to the police.

For an overview of the rules and more detail on rules for non-party campaigners, see Electoral Commission guidance for non-party campaigners at the Northern Ireland Assembly election, May 2016:

http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/193039/Northern-Ireland-Assembly-May-2016-non-party-campaigners.pdf

8.4 What counts as regulated campaign spending?

Spending on these activities will be regulated, if they are intended to influence voters to vote for or against political parties or categories of candidates, including political parties or categories of candidates who support or do not support particular policies or issues:

- press conferences or other media events that they organise
- transport in connection with publicising the campaign

Spending on the following activities is only regulated if the activities are also aimed at, seen or heard by, or involve the public. This applies to:

- the production or publication of election material
- canvassing and market research (including the use of phone banks)
- public rallies and public events

Spending on any of these activities will be regulated if the activity can reasonably be regarded as intended to influence voters to vote for or against a political party, or categories of candidates, including campaigns on policies or issues closely associated with a particular party or category of candidates.

For an overview of the rules and more detail on spending rules for non-party campaigners, see Electoral Commission guidance for non-party campaigners at the National Assembly for Wales and Police and Crime Commissioner elections, May 2016:

http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/193039/Northern-Ireland-Assembly-May-2016-non-party-campaigners.pdf

8.5 What are the spending limits for non-party campaigners in Northern Ireland?

The spending limit for non-party campaigners will depend on whether they register with the Electoral Commission as a registered non-party campaigner.

Not registered	£10,000 in Northern Ireland
Registered non-party campaigner	£15,300 in Northern Ireland

8.6 Who can register with the Electoral Commission as a non-party campaigner?

Only the following types of individuals or organisations can register and become a registered non-party campaigner:

- an individual registered on a UK electoral register, or resident in the UK
- a UK-registered political party (including 'minor parties')
- 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 a body incorporated by Royal Charter
- a UK charitable incorporated organisation
- a Scottish partnership which carries on business in the UK

8.7 What is considered a donation to a non-party campaigner?

Registered non-party campaigners must ensure that the rules on donations are followed. A donation is money, goods, property or services with a value over £500 and is given:

- towards their regulated campaign spending
- without charge or on non-commercial terms

Anything with a value of £500 or less is not a donation.

8.8 Who can non-party campaigners accept donations from?

Non-party campaigners can only accept donations from a permissible source. A permissible source is:

- an individual registered on a UK electoral register, including overseas electors and those leaving bequests
- a UK-registered company which is incorporated within the European Union and carries on business within the UK
- a UK-registered trade union
- a UK-registered building society
- a UK-registered limited liability partnership (LLP) that carries on business in the UK
- a UK-registered friendly society
- a UK unincorporated association that is based and carries on business or other activities in the UK

Section D – The election campaign

9. Party election broadcasts

9.1 How many election broadcasts are political parties entitled to in the run up to the Northern Ireland Assembly election?

The decision on how many broadcasts to allocate to political parties is for the relevant broadcasters to decide.

The political parties pay for and produce the content of the party election broadcasts (PEBs), which must observe the law – for example on copyright, defamation, contempt, obscenity and incitement to racial hatred or violence. They must also comply with the Ofcom Broadcasting Code or the BBC Editorial Guidelines that relate to harm and offence and fairness and privacy.

More information about how PEBs are allocated will be available from the Broadcasters' Liaison Group, the group of broadcasters that discusses the allocation of PEBs, visit www.broadcastersliaisongroup.org.uk.

The BBC's draft criteria for PEBs can be found at:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/our_work/editorial_standards/peb_2016

Ofcom's rules on PEBs can be found at:

<http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/guidance/programme-guidance/ppbrules/>

9.2 Are there rules on impartiality for the media during the Northern Ireland Assembly election?

News reports, features and editorials in print or online media are not subject to electoral law, and the law does not require them to be impartial. Political impartiality in broadcast media is covered by the editorial guidelines relevant to that broadcaster:

- The BBC's draft editorial guidelines on broadcasting during the elections in Northern Ireland can be found at:
http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/election_guidelines/2016/draft_election_guidelines.pdf
- Commercial broadcasters are subject to the Ofcom Broadcasting Code, which can be found at: <http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/broadcasting/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/elections/>

TV, radio and online debates between party leaders are also a matter for the relevant broadcasters and newspapers. The Electoral Commission has no regulatory role in relation to debates between party leaders.

10. Electoral fraud

10.1 What is Electoral Fraud and who leads on tackling it?

The Representation of the People Act 1983 specifies a number of criminal offences relating to electoral fraud. The relevant police force for the area in which the election is taking place would investigate any allegations that an offence may have taken place.

The PSNI has designated a Single Point of Contact officer (known as a SPOC) to lead on election-related crime, who will give advice to local police officers. Anyone making an allegation should be prepared to give the police a statement and substantiate their concerns. People can also choose to contact Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111.

Anyone, including candidates, politicians and members of the public, who has evidence of electoral fraud taking place should report it to the police immediately, using the 101 non-emergency number unless there is a crime in progress.

10.2 What are the different types of voting offences?

Offences include:

Personation

This is where an individual votes as someone else (whether that person is living or dead or is a fictitious person), either by post or at a polling station, in person or as a proxy.

Undue influence / Intimidation

A person is guilty of undue influence if they directly or indirectly make use of or threaten to make use of force, violence or restraint, or inflict or threaten to inflict injury, damage, loss or harm, in order to induce or compel any voter to vote or refrain from voting.

Bribery

A person is guilty of bribery if they directly or indirectly give any money or procure any office to or for any voter, in order to induce that voter to vote or not vote.

Multiple voting and proxy voting offences

There are various offences regarding multiple voting and proxy voting, including voting (whether in person, by post or by proxy) when subject to a legal incapacity to vote and voting more than once in the same election.

False registration information

It is an offence to supply false registration information to an Electoral Registration Officer. It is also an offence to supply false information in connection with an application for a postal or proxy vote.

10.3 How confident can the electorate feel about postal voting?

Postal voting is not available on demand in Northern Ireland. When making an application a person must give a valid reason for their application along with their date of birth, national insurance number and signature.

10.4 How does the Electoral Commission work with political parties to prevent postal vote fraud?

The Electoral Commission has agreed with political parties on a [code of conduct](#) on the handling of postal vote applications and postal ballot packs by political parties, candidates and canvassers. The code says parties and candidates:

- should **never** assist in completing a ballot paper - instead, candidates should always refer the voter to the Returning Officer's staff who may be able to arrange a home visit or provide assistance at the polling station.
- should **never** handle or take any completed ballot paper from voters. Instead, voters should be encouraged to post their postal ballot pack themselves - alternatively, the Returning Officer's staff can be contacted to arrange for it to be collected.

10.5 What happens if a political party breaches the code of conduct?

The Electoral Commission asks political parties to investigate any reported breaches and take action to ensure that any problems are not repeated. This includes potentially taking disciplinary action against party members.

10.6 Who is responsible for putting in place plans to deal with electoral fraud?

The primary responsibility for ensuring that robust plans to prevent and detect fraud are in place lies with the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland.

Section E – The voter

11. Registering to vote

11.1 Who can register to vote at the Northern Ireland Assembly election?

To vote in both the Northern Ireland Assembly election a person must be registered to vote, 18 years of age or over on polling day and also be one of the following:

- a British or Irish citizen
- a qualifying Commonwealth citizen
- a citizen of another European Union member state

11.2 How can someone register to vote?

People can register to vote by contacting the Electoral Office helpline on 0800 4320 712 or by downloading a registration form from www.eoni.org.uk or www.aboutmyvote.co.uk . The form must be completed and returned to the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.

11.3 How do members of the armed services register and vote?

Service personnel and their spouses or civil partners, serving in the UK or overseas, can register either at their UK home address as an ordinary voter or as a ‘service voter’.

Service voters fill out an armed services declaration so they can be registered when away from their home address on duty.

For more information visit www.eoni.org.uk

11.4 What support is offered to people with a learning disability to help them to register to vote?

People with a disability can receive assistance from someone else to complete an application form. If the person registering is unable to sign the form then a witness must sign their form and provide their name and address.

11.5 What is the deadline to register to vote?

A person must apply to register by **Monday 18 April** for the polls on Thursday 5 May. However, everyone should register as soon as possible rather than wait for the deadline.

11.6 Can someone register at two different addresses?

This depends on the individual's particular circumstances.

A person can register to vote at an address if they are resident at that address. It may be possible to be registered at more than one address, as long as the person is resident at each address.

An example of this may be full-time students, who may be able to register at both their term-time address and their home address. It would be an offence for a person to vote twice at the Northern Ireland Assembly election.

11.7 What is the deadline for applying for postal and proxy voting?

The deadline for applying for a postal or proxy vote at the Northern Ireland Assembly election is **5pm on Thursday 14 April**

11.8 Can prisoners vote?

Remand prisoners (those who have not been convicted and sentenced) can vote. Convicted prisoners detained because of their sentence cannot.

11.9 Can you register to vote online?

It is not possible to register to vote online in Northern Ireland. However the Chief Electoral Officer has indicated that an online registration system should be in place in Northern Ireland in the autumn of 2016

12. The voting system

12.1 How do candidates get elected at the Northern Ireland Assembly election?

The electoral system used in elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly is the single transferable vote (STV) system.

Voters cast their votes by putting a number '1' next to the name of their favourite candidate, a '2' next to their second favourite candidate and so on. Voters can vote for as many or as few candidates as they like.

13. The voting process

13.1 When will polling stations be open?

Polling starts at 7am and closes at 10pm. The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland will send a poll card to each elector giving the location of their polling station. It is not necessary for voters to bring their poll card when they vote.

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland will also be able to tell voters where their polling station is and a postcode search facility is available at www.eoni.org.uk or call the helpline on 0800 4320 712.

13.2 What happens if someone is still queuing to vote at polling station at 10pm?

Any voter who arrives at the polling station before 10pm and is still waiting to vote at 10pm will be able to vote.

13.3 What different ways are there for someone to vote?

Most voters in Northern Ireland will vote in person at polling station. However if a person is unable to make it to the polling station then they may be able to apply to voter by post or proxy.

In person

Voters must present photographic identification at their polling station to confirm their identity. Voters must present one of the following to poll staff before they can be issued with a ballot paper:

- a UK, Irish or EU passport
- a photographic Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Irish or EEA driving licence
- a Translink Senior Smartpass
- a Translink 60+ Smartpass
- a Translink War Disabled Smartpass
- a Translink Blind Person's Smartpass
- an Electoral Identity Card

The identification does not need to be 'current' but the presiding officer must be satisfied that the photograph matches that of the person intending to vote.

13.4 By post

Voters in Northern Ireland can apply for a postal vote but must provide a valid reason for their application such as:

- inability to attend due to illness
- blindness or other disability
- absence on the day of poll due to work commitments
- holiday arrangements

Postal and proxy vote application forms are available from area electoral offices or www.eoni.org.uk or by calling the helpline on 0800 4320 712.

- Postal ballot papers will be sent directly to voters before polling day.
- Voters should complete their ballot paper and their declaration of identity with their signature and date of birth, and return these to the Deputy Returning Officer before 10pm on 7 May.
- Votes arriving after 10pm on 7 May will not be counted.
- If voters don't leave enough time to post their vote, they can take it by hand to their local area electoral office from 7am to 10pm on polling day.

13.5 By proxy

Some voters can also apply to vote by proxy. This is where they ask someone they trust to vote on their behalf, such as a spouse or other family member.

The criteria for applying for a proxy vote are the same as that for a postal vote.

The deadline for applying for a postal or proxy vote for the Northern Ireland Assembly election is 5pm on Thursday 14 April 2016.

13.6 How should voters complete their ballot paper?

Voters cast their votes by putting an number '1' next to the name of their favourite candidate, a '2' next to their second favourite candidate and so on. Voters can vote for as many or as few candidates as they like.

13.7 What advice is provided for people with a disability at the polling station?

The Presiding Officer and poll clerks should be aware of what support they can and should offer a person with a disability if they are asked to provide assistance.

The Electoral Commission has also worked with Mencap to produce a factsheet that explains what support is available for anyone who wants to cast their vote in person on 5 May 2016.

14. Raising awareness of voter registration

14.1 How can organisations help encourage people to register to vote at the Northern Ireland Assembly election?

The Electoral Commission is working with a range of partner organisations (<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/electoral-registration/partnership-working/partner-organisations/northern-ireland-partners>) from the corporate, public and voluntary sectors in Northern Ireland - to try and reach traditionally under-registered voters and encourage them to register to vote. This activity will continue up to, and beyond, the Northern Ireland Assembly election and includes activity targeted at young people, students, those from certain BME communities and recent home movers, all of whom we know are less likely to be registered.

Working with partners, the Electoral Commission has launched a partnership pack which offers practical suggestions for organisations that want to run their own registration drives or other activity. The pack, and subsequent updates (<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/electoral-registration/partnership-working/resources-for-partners/northern-ireland>) from the Commission, also highlighted other activities they could undertake to encourage voter registration.

14.2 Is the Electoral Commission doing anything to encourage people to register to vote at the Northern Ireland Assembly?

From February, the Electoral Commission has been running radio, outdoor and online advertising to get people registered. We will increase this and start TV advertising across Northern Ireland from 14 March. This includes activity and channels specifically targeted at under-registered groups.

Section G – The count

15. How the count works

15.1 When does the count take place?

The count for the Northern Ireland Assembly election will commence at 8am on Friday 6 May 2016. The counting of votes will take place in the venues shown below:

Constituencies	Venue
Belfast East/Belfast North/Belfast South/Belfast West	Titanic Exhibition Centre, Belfast
East Antrim/South Antrim	Valley Leisure Centre, Newtownabbey
East Londonderry/Foyle	Foyle Arena, Derry/Londonderry
Fermanagh and South Tyrone/West Tyrone	Omagh Leisure Centre
Lagan Valley/South Down	Lagan Valley Leisureplex, Lisburn
Mid-Ulster/North Antrim	Seven Towers Leisure Centre, Ballymena
Newry and Armagh/South Down	Banbridge Leisure Centre
Strangford/North Down	Aurora Leisure Complex, Bangor

15.2 What happens at the count?

These are the stages of the count process for the Northern Ireland Assembly election:

1) Receipt of ballot boxes

- Postal ballot boxes and ballot boxes from the polling stations arrive at the count venue following the close of polls. The unused ballot papers are counted overnight

2) Verification

- Verification of the ballot papers will commence at 8am on Friday 6 May at each count venue. Only after verification has taken place can counting staff begin counting the votes.
- Staff count the ballot papers from each polling station. They verify that the number of ballot papers matches the number of papers issued, as recorded on the Presiding Officer's ballot paper accounts.
- Staff also count the postal ballot papers and verify that the number of ballot papers in postal ballot boxes matches the numbers recorded by the Returning Officer.

- The Deputy Returning Officer produces a statement showing how many ballot papers have been received against how many ballot papers were expected and will announce the turnout at this stage.

3) Counting of the votes

- Staff begin counting the ballot papers.
- Staff count the number of first preference votes cast for each candidate.
- The Deputy Returning Officer sorts the ballot papers into parcels according to the first preference votes cast. The number is recorded along with the total number of valid ballot papers.
- The total number of valid ballot papers is then divided by the number of candidates to be elected plus one. One is then added to this total. This will then provide the quota needed for a candidate to be elected. An example of how the quota is made is provided below:

Total number of valid votes: 48,921

Number of candidates: 6

Quota: $(48,921 / 7) + 1 = 6989$

- Any candidate who reaches or exceeds the quota is deemed elected. Any surplus votes they have are then redistributed according to the voter's choice at a fractional value to ensure fairness. The candidate with the least number of votes is then eliminated and their votes are redistributed in a similar way. This process continues until all seats have been filled.
- On completion of each stage of the count, the Deputy Returning Officer will tell the candidates and agents the outcome and allow them to request a recount. The Deputy Returning Officer will allow a maximum of five minutes for candidates and agents to attend. At the end of that time, unless a recount is required, he or she shall proceed to the next stage of the count. The Deputy Returning Officer is obliged to conduct one re-count if requested, but may refuse further re-counts. Only the most recent completed stage can be recounted.

4) Declaration of the result

- The Deputy Returning Officer will make an announcement after each stage of the count. They will announce if any candidate has been elected or eliminated at the previous stage and will advise what will happen at the next stage. Once six candidates have been elected the Deputy Returning Officer will make a declaration on who has been elected as MLAS for the constituency.

15.3 Can the media attend the count?

Members of the media must apply to the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland if they wish to attend the count. They should abide by any instructions the Deputy Returning Officer gives. You can find more information on how to apply to become an observer on the Electoral Office [website](#).

15.4 How many votes did each party achieve at the last election to the Northern Ireland Assembly?

You can find information on the 2011 Assembly elections results on the Electoral Commission website (<http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/northern-ireland-assembly-elections/northern-ireland-assembly-election-2011>). You will also find Commission reports on how the election was run.

Challenging the result of the Northern Ireland Assembly election

15.5 How does someone challenge the result of an election?

Someone can challenge the result of an election by issuing an election petition.

An election petition can be presented by:

- someone who voted or had the right to vote at the election
- someone alleging themselves to have been a candidate at the election
- someone claiming to have had the right to be elected at the election

Petitioners must present the petition within 21 days of the declaration of the result. Where the petition relates to election expenses or corrupt or illegal practices involving the payment of money after the election, further time may be allowed.

Petitioners must sign the petition and return it to the Clerk of the Crown at the Royal Courts of Justice in Belfast.