
Referendums

Previous UK referendums

There has been one UK-wide referendum. This was held in 1975 to help determine whether the UK should remain a member of the European Community. Since then, referendums have been held on issues of governance in London, the North East of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Our role

The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) gives the Electoral Commission responsibility for:

- commenting on the wording of the referendum question
- registration of campaigners
- designating lead campaign organisations
- regulating campaign spending and donations
- giving grants to lead campaign organisations
- the conduct of the poll
- the announcement of the result

Additional legislation must be made to enable a referendum to take place.

Campaign timetable

Before a referendum is held, there is a formal campaigning period called the 'referendum period'. During this period restrictions surrounding campaign expenditure and publicity will apply.

From the first day of the referendum period, we will start to register those who intend to spend more than £10,000 campaigning, who will be known as 'permitted participants'.

Once registered, campaigners can also apply to become the lead campaign group, known as the 'designated organisation', for one side of the debate.

For the first four weeks of the campaign we will accept applications from campaigners wanting to become the designated organisation. After this, we will decide whether to designate. We must designate lead campaigners for both sides or not at all.

Benefits for designated organisations

Designated organisations qualify for an expenditure limit of £5 million UK-wide. They also qualify for certain publicly funded assistance, including:

- free postal distribution of one piece of referendum literature to each household or elector
- referendum TV campaign broadcasts
- equal grants of public money of up to £600,000 UK-wide (amount to be determined by the Commission)
- free use of public rooms for meetings (except in Northern Ireland)

Referendum expenditure

The amount that can be spent on campaigning at a referendum is limited by PERA. For a UK-wide referendum, the level of expenditure for political parties is based on the proportion of the electorate who voted for the party at the previous UK Parliamentary general election.

Following a referendum, campaigners ('permitted participants') must submit expenditure and donation returns to us.

For a referendum in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, or a region of England, the campaign expenditure limits would be set out in further legislation.

The referendum question

The Government is responsible for proposing the wording of any referendum question. The law requires us to give our views on whether any question is intelligible.

We have developed a set of question assessment guidelines to help assess a question once it is published. These guidelines are available on our website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/referendums.

We will look at a proposed question from the perspective of voters, to see if it is written in a way that means they are likely to understand it.

Publicity

The Government and other bodies that are mainly publicly funded are prohibited from issuing any publicity material relating to a referendum in the 28 days immediately prior to the poll. However, this does not relate to material specifically sought by a member of the

public, to factual information relating to the conduct of the poll or the issue of press notices.

The BBC and S4C are exempt from the restriction, as is the Commission.

Any individuals or groups publishing material relating to a referendum must include their name and address on their material.

Counting the votes

The Chair of the Commission (or another person appointed by the Chair) will be the Chief Counting Officer (CCO) for any referendum held under PPERA.

Feedback

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