

The Electoral Commission

Media Handbook

**UK Parliamentary General Election
(UKPGE) – Northern Ireland**

Thursday 7 May 2015

March 2015

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Note: [A separate media handbook](#) for Great Britain has been produced

Websites

www.electoralcommission.org.uk

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 and those administering the election.

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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1 Who's who at the UKPGE and their responsibilities?

The [Fixed-term Parliament Act 2011](#) set the date for the UK Parliamentary General Election (UKPGE) as Thursday 7 May 2015.

1.1 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

1.2 . 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.

1.3 Deputy Returning Officer

For the UKPGE the Chief Electoral Officer has appointed a Deputy Returning Officer for each two constituencies.

1.4 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.

1.5 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, in partnership with EONI, for candidates standing for election and their agents
- 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

2 UK Parliamentary General Election 2015 timetable – Northern Ireland

Event	Date
Regulated period for campaign spending by political parties begins	Friday 23 May 2014
Regulated period for campaign spending by non-party campaigners begins	Friday 19 September 2014
Start of 'long campaign' regulated period for candidate spending	Friday 19 December 2014
Dissolution of Parliament and issue of writ	Monday 30 March 2015
Start of 'short campaign' regulated period for candidate spending	Monday 30 March
Receipt of writ	Tuesday 31 March
Last day for publication of notice of election	Thursday 2 April
Deadline for candidates to deliver nomination papers	4pm, Thursday 9 April
Deadline for candidates to withdraw	4pm, Thursday 9 April
Publication of statement of persons nominated	In most cases, 5pm, Thursday 9 April. If objections to nominations have been made, no later than 4pm, Friday 10 April
Deadline for first weekly pre-poll donation and loan report by political parties and non-party campaigners to the Electoral Commission	Sunday 12 April.
Deadline for applying for a postal or proxy vote	5pm, Thursday 16 April
Deadline for second pre-poll donation and loan report to the Electoral Commission	Sunday 19 April.
Deadline to register to vote	Monday 20 April
Deadline for third pre-poll donation and loan report to the Electoral Commission	Sunday 26 April.
Deadline for fourth pre-poll donation and loan report to the Electoral Commission	Sunday 3 May.
Polling day	7am to 10pm, Thursday 7 May
Election count	To start as soon as practically possible after 10pm, Thursday 7 May. Results expected to be announced on Friday 8 May.
Deadline for fifth pre-poll donation and loan report to the Electoral Commission	Sunday 10 May.

Deadline for sixth and final pre-poll donation and loan report to the Electoral Commission	Thursday 14 May.
Last day for submission of candidate spending returns to the Chief Electoral Officer	Friday 12 June for results announced on Friday 8 May
Deadline for political parties and non-party campaigners that have spent £250,000 or under to submit campaign spending returns to the Electoral Commission	Friday 7 August
Deadline for political parties and non-party campaigners that have spent over £250,000 to submit campaign spending returns to the Electoral Commission	Saturday 7 November

SECTION A – Candidates

3 Becoming a candidate

3.1 Who can become a candidate?

Anyone who wants to stand at the UKPGE must be:

- at least 18 years old on the day of nomination; and
- a British or Irish citizen, a citizen of the Republic of Ireland or a qualifying Commonwealth citizen

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

3.2 Are there any rules barring a candidate from standing?

Some of the rules barring a candidate from standing to become a Member of Parliament include if:

- they are civil servants, members of police forces or members of the armed forces
- they are the subject of a bankruptcy restrictions order made by a court in England, Wales or Northern Ireland (though bankruptcy in itself does not bar them from standing); or, their estate has been sequestered by a court in Scotland and they have not been discharged
- they 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
- they have been found or reported guilty of a corrupt or an illegal electoral practice within the past five or three years respectively

For more detailed guidance on what disqualifies someone from standing to be a Member of Parliament, see the Electoral Commission's guidance for candidates and agents, Part 1, pages 3 – 5
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/179939/UKPGE-Part-1-Can-you-stand-for-election-NI.pdf

3.3 How does someone become a candidate?

Candidates can choose to stand for election as a Member of Parliament either as a 'party candidate' or as an 'independent candidate'.

The earliest date that someone can officially become a candidate is on the day that the UK Parliament is dissolved – which is likely to be **Monday 30 March**. However, prospective candidates can be selected by their party, or announce their intention to stand before this.

A candidate must submit their nomination papers to the Deputy Returning Officer by 4pm, Thursday 9 April in order to stand.

3.4 What does someone who wants to stand as a party candidate in the UKPGE have to do?

Prospective party candidates must submit the following to their Deputy Returning Officer:

- completed nomination, home address and consent to nominations forms
- the signatures of 10 registered electors from the constituency supporting the nomination
- a deposit of £500
- a certificate from the political party authorising the use of the party name or a party description as registered by the Electoral Commission
- a written request to use one of the party's registered emblems (optional)

Candidates standing for a political party can request the use of a party name or description on the ballot paper, but they cannot request both.

3.5 What does someone who wants to stand as an independent candidate in the UKPGE have to do?

Prospective independent candidates must submit the following to their Deputy Returning Officer:

- completed nomination, home address and consent to nominations forms
- the signatures of 10 registered electors from the constituency supporting the nomination
- a deposit of £500.

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

The EONI will publish the full list of candidates standing on their website (www.eoni.org.uk) by 5pm on Thursday 9 April. If objections to nominations have been made, they will publish the list no later than 4pm, Friday 10 April.

4 Campaigning at the election

4.1 What can candidates say about one another during the 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.

4.2 Are there any electoral rules regarding campaign materials?

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

4.3 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.

4.4 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.

4.5 Do candidates get free delivery of leaflets?

Yes, candidates are entitled to one free postage to electors in the constituency. This can include:

- one unaddressed election communication of up to 60 grams to every postal address, or
- one election communication of up to 60 grams addressed to each elector

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

5 Campaign spending limits and rules on accepting donations

5.1 How much can candidates spend on their election campaign?

The regulated period for a UK Parliamentary general election is divided into two periods: the 'long campaign' and the 'short campaign'. Each period has its own spending limit. The spending limits for each period are calculated by adding together a base amount and a variable top up that takes into account the number of registered electors in the constituency that is being contested.

5.2 What are the spending limits?

Regulated period	Dates	Fixed amount	Variable amounts
Long campaign	Friday 19 December to Sunday 29 March*	£30,700	6p per registered parliamentary elector in a borough constituency (the four Belfast constituencies) or 9p per registered parliamentary elector in a county constituency (all other constituencies in Northern Ireland)
Short campaign	Monday 30 March to Thursday 7 May	£8,700	6p per registered parliamentary elector in a borough constituency (the four Belfast constituencies) or 9p per registered parliamentary elector in a county constituency (all other constituencies in Northern Ireland)

*The long campaign ends on the day **before** an individual officially becomes a candidate. The earliest date that someone can officially become a candidate – and the short campaign can start - is on the day that the UK Parliament is dissolved – **Monday 30 March**.

If a candidate, or someone acting on their behalf has announced their intention to stand before the 30 March, the long campaign will end on 29 March.

If an individual's intention to stand as a candidate is not announced before the 30 March, the long campaign will end and the short campaign will begin on either the day that they do, or the date that they are nominated as a candidate, whichever is the earlier.

5.3 How do candidates know how many people live in the constituency they are standing in?

The number of Parliamentary electors in a particular constituency is based on the electoral register as it stands on the last date for publication of the notice of election (4pm, Thursday 2 April).

This date is after Parliament has been dissolved (and the 'short' campaign has begun) which means that candidates will not know the exact amount that they can spend in the 'long' campaign until after it has ended.

Candidates can contact their local area electoral office at any given point in the long campaign however, to request the most up-to-date number of electors to help them plan their spending during the 'long' campaign.

5.4 What activities count towards the spending limit?

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, stationary and photocopying.

5.5 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
- facilities you use because you are entitled to do so as a candidate, such as a public room for a meeting
- volunteer time including time spent by your staff that you do not pay them for
- someone's main residence
- someone's personal car or other means of transport
- general computer equipment bought for personal use

5.6 Does campaign spending by a political party in a particular constituency count towards a candidate's spending limit?

Only if the spending is on items that promote the candidate, for example, a letter sent to electors introducing the candidate and their local policies.

If the items promote the party, for example, posters with the party name and not the candidate's name, that expenditure would count towards the political party's campaign spending limit.

5.7 What rules apply to hustings?

Hustings can be organised by anyone, and are events designed to give the public an opportunity to hear from the candidates or parties standing for election in their constituency.

There is no legal requirement for the person or body (including non-party campaigners) organising a husting to invite all candidates or parties standing in a constituency. However, spending on hustings may be regulated depending on how

it is organised. This may happen where the organiser selectively invites or excludes candidates or parties. If the organiser only invites some candidates or some parties, then a share of the costs of the event may count towards the election spending of those who are invited.

Where the hustings is organised by a non-party campaigner, then spending on the event may count towards their spending limit if they do not have an impartial reason for not inviting all candidates or parties.

If the event is organised by a non-party campaigner and all candidates or all parties standing candidates in a constituency are invited (even if they do not all attend) or there are impartial reasons for not inviting certain candidates or parties, then it does not count towards candidate, party or non-party campaigner spending.

The Electoral Commission has produced guidance for non-party campaigners who are thinking of organising a Hustings
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/169480/sp-hustings-npc-ukpge.pdf

5.8 Is there a limit on donations a candidate can accept in the UKPGE?

No. However, candidates can only accept donations of money, items or services worth more than £50 towards their campaign spending from a permissible source (see section 5.9).

All donations worth more than £50 must be published in the candidate's spending return. They do not need to declare donations with a value of £50 or less.

5.9 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 in the UK 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

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, Part 3 Section B:

http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/179911/2015-UKPGE-Part-3-NI-candidates-and-agents-FINAL.pdf

5.10 To what extent can political parties fund their candidates?

Many political parties run a local ‘fighting fund’ for their candidate. If the fund is managed and controlled by the party and not the candidate, then donations to the fund are usually treated as having been made to the party.

However, during the regulated period, any donations made by the party to a candidate above £50 must be reported in the candidate’s spending return.

5.11 Who do candidates report their regulated spending to and when?

Candidates standing to be a Member of Parliament (or their agents) must submit their campaign spending returns to Chief Electoral Officer within **35 days of the election result being declared**.

The return should separate donations and spending between the ‘long’ and ‘short’ campaigns.

If no spending is incurred, a nil return must be submitted by the candidate (or their agent).

5.12 What happens if a candidate exceeds their spending limit?

Allegations relating to the Representation of the People Act (RPA) 1983, including candidate spending, are generally made to the police to consider.

Whilst the Electoral Commission does have a statutory duty to monitor compliance with parts of the RPA relating to candidates and agents’ expenses, it is not legally empowered to investigate and impose sanctions for offences under the RPA.

SECTION B – Political parties

6 Campaign spending limits, donations and what must be reported

6.1 What is the maximum that a political party can spend on campaigning?

The spending limit is £30,000 x the number of seats the party is contesting. There are 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland.

If a party is contesting each of the 18 Parliamentary constituencies across Northern Ireland then it would be: £30,000 x 18 = £540,000.

Spending incurred before the regulated period (such as purchasing leaflets) but used during the regulated period also counts towards the party's spending limit.

To see how spending limits could vary, depending on the number of constituencies they are contesting and where they are contesting them, see our Guidance to political parties, pages 6 – 7:
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/164079/sp-ukpge-2015.pdf

6.2 When is the regulated period?

The regulated period began on Friday 23 May 2014 (the day after the European Parliamentary elections) and ends on the day of the poll, Thursday 7 May 2015.

6.3 What activities count towards the spending limit?

Party spending is defined as items, facilities and services that are used to promote itself, or criticise other parties, during the regulated period.

These activities include:

- advertising of any kind - for example street banners, websites and videos
- unsolicited material sent to voters - for example, letters or leaflets
- the manifesto and other documents setting out the party's policies
- market research to find out how people intend to vote
- press conferences
- rallies and events, including the cost of people's attendance and any goods, services or facilities provided
- transport in connection with publicising the campaign
- production costs on party election broadcasts

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

Yes. Activities that do not count include:

- 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 you reimburse them
- expenses met out of public funds. For example, security costs for VIP visits
- anything which a candidate declares on their spending return

For more information on political party campaigning at the 2015 UK Parliamentary General Election, see our guidance:
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/106363/to-campaign-spend-rp.pdf

6.5 When do political parties report their regulated spending?

The deadline for registered political parties that have spent £250,000 or under to submit their return to the Electoral Commission is **7 August 2015**.

The deadline for registered political parties that have spent over £250,000 to submit their return to the Electoral Commission is **7 November 2015**.

6.6 Is there a limit on donations that a political party can accept in the run-up to the UKPGE?

No. However, parties can only accept donations worth more than £500 towards their campaign from a permissible source (see section 5.8)

6.7 When will the political parties report their donations to the Electoral Commission?

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.

After 30 March and up until the end of polling day, political parties central HQs must submit weekly donation and loan reports.

6.8 What are the weekly donation and loan reports publication dates?

Political parties central HQs must submit weekly donation and loan reports setting out what donations and loans they have received over £7,500 after 30 March up until polling day.

Reporting period	Deadline to submit report
30 March – 5 April	Sunday 12 April
6 April – 12 April	Sunday 19 April
13 April – 19 April	Sunday 26 April
20 April – 26 April	Sunday 3 May
27 April – 3 May	Sunday 10 May
4 May – 7 May	Thursday 14 May

After the UKPGE has taken place, the next donations that political parties and their accounting units will report to the Electoral Commission will be in the quarterly report covering the period April to June.

SECTION C – Non-party campaigners

7 Rules for non-party campaigners at the UKPGE

7.1 What are ‘non-party campaigners’?

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

A non-party campaigner may, for example, be a campaigning organisation, a trade union, a charity, a faith group, a company or an individual. As at previous UKPGEs, non-party campaigners can campaign even though they are not standing as a political party or candidate.

Any non-party campaigner that intends to spend £10,000 in Northern Ireland during the regulated period (19 September 2014 – 7 May 2015) must register with the Electoral Commission and follow rules on campaigning set out in legislation.

To see which non-party campaigners have so far registered with the Electoral Commission, visit: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/political-parties-campaigning-and-donations/non-party-campaign-spending-and-donations-at-elections/register-of-non-party-campaigners>

7.2 How are non-party campaigners affected by the “Lobbying Act”?

Non-party campaigners that spend money on certain campaigning activities that can be reasonably regarded as intended to influence voters in the run-up to an election have been regulated since rules were first put in place in 2000.

The Transparency of Lobbying, Non Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 (the “Lobbying Act”) has changed the rules that are set out in PPERA and means that:

- a wider range of campaigning activities will be subject to new rules on spending.
- there are lower spending limits
- there are increased reporting requirements for registered campaigners
- higher registration thresholds

You can read the briefings that we issued on the Act calling for changes as it passed through parliament [here](#). We will also be contributing to the review that has been set up by the UK Government to look at the impact of this legislation, chaired by Lord Hodgson.

7.3 What activities are now covered by this legislation?

In the past, spending on election material was regulated. The new rules now cover spending on election material and:

- public rallies and other public events
- press conferences and media events
- canvassing or market research - for example, using phone banks to encourage people to vote a certain way
- transport in connection with publicising a campaign

7.4 How much can registered non-party campaigners spend at the UKPGE?

The amount that registered non-party campaigners can spend during the regulated period is £30,800 in Northern Ireland.

7.5 Do non-party campaigners have to report donations to the Electoral Commission?

Like political party central HQs, registered non-party campaigners can only accept donations over £500 from a permissible source and must report any donations that total over £7,500 to the Electoral Commission.

The legislation has in addition introduced new pre-poll reporting requirements for registered non-party campaigners.

7.6 What are the pre-poll reporting requirements for non-party campaigners?

Registered non-party campaigners must complete three pre-poll donation reports setting out what donations they have received (even if they subsequently refuse them) over £7,500 between the start of the regulated period (19 September 2014) and the day before the dissolution of Parliament (29 March 2015). This includes details of the donor.

During this pre-poll period, registered non-party campaigners must also report any donations that they receive which are below £7,500, but are above £500. They do not need to provide the Commission with details of the donor, just that they have accepted the donations and that they are permissible.

Previously, non-party campaigners would have provided this information after the election.

Reporting period	Deadline for pre-poll reports	Date Electoral Commission will publish donations
19 September – 18 December 2014	Saturday 17 January	Thursday 12 February
19 December 2014 – 18 March 2015	Friday 17 April	Thursday 30 April
19 March – 29 March	Tuesday 28 April	Tuesday 5 May

Registered non-party campaigners must also submit weekly donation reports setting out what donations they have received over £7,500 after 30 March up until polling day.

7.7 When must non-party campaigners report their spending to the Electoral Commission?

The deadline for registered non-party campaigners that have spent £250,000 or under to submit their return to the Electoral Commission is **7 August 2015**.

The deadline for registered non-party campaigners that have spent over £250,000 to submit their return to the Electoral Commission is **7 November 2015**.

To see the guidance that the Electoral Commission has produced for non-party campaigners, visit: <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/party-or-campaigner/non-party-campaigners/guidance>

7.8 What support has the Electoral Commission provided non-party campaigners to help them comply with these new rules?

The Electoral Commission produced a comprehensive package of guidance to help non-party campaigners comply with the new rules in [July 2014](#).

In advance of issuing the guidance, the Electoral Commission listened to the concerns of campaigners to understand how its guidance could best help them, held roundtable events across the UK, ran a survey and issued a [series of campaigner updates](#) to more than 1,200 to subscribers.

7.9 How has the Electoral Commission worked with the voluntary sector specifically?

The Electoral Commission produced [guidance](#) specifically aimed for charities in collaboration with the Charity Commission, the Scottish Charity Regulator and the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland.

Since the Electoral Commission published its guidance in July. Following specific requests from some charities, it has produced additional [factsheets on common campaigning techniques](#) as well as a [Frequently Asked Questions page](#) on its website to help support charities and others as they plan their campaigning activities.

Non-party campaigners are vital to a healthy democracy and the Electoral Commission encourages their active participation in the campaign period ahead of the general election. Where a significant amount of money is being spent on campaigning, it's right that voters can see whose spending that money and what outcome they are campaigning for.

As is the case after any election where there has been a significant change to the

rules, the Electoral Commission will comment on how the new rules worked, and the experiences of non-party campaigners, in its statutory post-election report. The Commission will also be actively engaging with the statutory reviewer of the legislation who will report after the election.

SECTION D – The election campaign

8 Party election broadcasts

8.1 How many election broadcasts are political parties entitled to in the run up to the UKPGE?

The decision on how many broadcasts to allocate to political parties is for the 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 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://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/election_guidelines/2014/peb_draft_criteria.pdf

Ofcom's rules on PEBs can be found at:

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

8.2 Are there rules on impartiality for the media during the UKPGE?

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 UKPGE can be found at http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/our_work/election_guidelines/2014/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.

9 Electoral fraud

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

9.1 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.

9.2 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.

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

The Electoral Commission has recently agreed with political parties to strengthen its [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 their local area electoral office who may be able to offer advice (
- should **never** handle or take any completed ballot paper from voters. Instead, voters should be encouraged to post their postal ballot pack themselves

9.4 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.

9.5 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 who works closely with the PSNI

SECTION E – The voter

10 Registering to vote

10.1 Who can register to vote at the UKPGE?

A person can register to vote in the UKPGE if they are aged 18 or over on polling day; and are:

- a British or Irish citizen; or
- a qualifying Commonwealth citizen resident in the UK

10.2 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.

10.3 How can citizens overseas register and vote?

British and/or Irish citizens living abroad can register to vote as an 'Overseas Voter' if they have been registered to vote in Northern Ireland in the last 15 years.

To find out more about how to register as an overseas voter and to download an overseas registration form visit www.eoni.org.uk

10.4 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

10.5 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.

10.6 What is the deadline to register to vote?

Voters must apply to register by midnight on **Monday 20 April** in order to be able to vote on Thursday 7 May.

10.7 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 UK Parliamentary general election. Yes. A person can register at more than one address, as long as they are resident at each address. However, they can only vote once in a Parliamentary election. For example, students can register if they wish at both their home and their term time address.

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

The deadline for applying for a postal and proxy vote at the UKPGE is **5pm, Thursday 16 April**.

10.9 Can prisoners vote?

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

The Electoral Commission's aim is to make sure everyone who is eligible and wants to vote is able to do so. The registration deadline is **Monday 20 April 2015**. Anyone who is not registered should visit www.aboutmyvote.co.uk to find out more. **It would be helpful for any relevant stories you run to highlight this deadline and a link to About My Vote or the EONI website.**

11 The voting process

11.1 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 to 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

11.2 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**.

Legislation was changed by the UK Government in 2013 to allow this to happen following a recommendation by the Electoral Commission.

11.3 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 vote by post or proxy.

11.4 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.

11.5 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.

11.6 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 UKPGE is 5pm on Thursday 16 April 2015.

11.7 How should voters complete their ballot paper?

At the UKPGE, voters should mark their ballot paper with a single 'X' in the box next to the candidate they wish to be their Member of Parliament for their constituency.

11.8 What advice does the Electoral Commission provide for people with a learning or access 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.

12 Raising awareness of voter registration

12.1 How can organisations help encourage people to register to vote at the UKPGE?

The Electoral Commission began working [with a range of partner organisations](#) – from the corporate, public and voluntary sectors – in summer 2014 to try and reach traditionally under-registered voters and encourage them to register to vote. This activity will continue up to, and beyond, the General 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.

In December, working with its partners, the Electoral Commission launched a [partnership pack](#) which provided practical suggestions for organisations that wanted to run their own registration drives or other activity ahead of the UKPGE. The pack, and [subsequent updates from the Commission](#), also highlighted activity they could undertake to encourage voter registration.

12.2 What is the Electoral Commission doing to encourage people to register to vote at the UKPGE?

The Commission supported National Voter Registration Day on 5 February on social media and through other activities, such as helping [Operation Black Vote to launch their national bus tour](#) and worked with [Facebook](#) to get information about registration in people's newsfeeds.

The Electoral Commission will launch its main public information campaign in Northern Ireland on **Wednesday 1 April 2015** which will include TV, radio, press, outdoor and online advertising.

The Commission is doing a series of briefings for Parliamentarians updating them on its public awareness activity, which you will be able to find [here](#) as they are published.

12.3 Overseas voters

The Electoral Commission is also committed to getting as many UK citizens that are now living overseas but remain eligible to vote registered as part of its public awareness activity. To support this objective the Commission:

- is running an online advertising campaign to target as many expats as possible and encourage them to register to vote
- organised an Overseas Voter Registration Day to spread the message via social media that registering to vote is easier than ever before for expats.
- provided template resources for partner organisations with links to the expat community
- Worked with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to get materials shared with British foreign embassies in order for them to undertake local media activities.
- Blogged about its campaign launch which was read in over 70 countries

12.4 Service Personnel

Every year the Ministry of Defence (MOD), with the support of the Electoral Commission, run a campaign to encourage service personnel to register to vote or to update their registration details.

The Electoral Commission:

- will support Unit Registration Officers to hold a Service Registration Day during February and March with packs made up of registration forms, posters and booklets
- will place adverts across forces media
- will work with the MOD internal communications channels to get registration messages to service personnel

- use social media to encourage its partners with links to the service community to spread registration messages

SECTION F – The Count

13 How the UKPGE count works and the declaration of results

13.1 Who is responsible for the count?

The Chief Electoral Officer and his Deputy Returning Officers have overall responsibility for the counting of the votes. This includes ensuring Presiding Officers transport ballot boxes from polling stations to the count venue in a secure and timely manner; and that those recruited to count ballot papers have been well trained in how to carry out their duties.

13.2 When will the count start?

The [Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010](#) states that “The returning officer shall take reasonable steps to begin counting the votes given on the ballot papers as soon as practicable within the period of four hours starting with the close of the poll”. Polls close at 10pm.

13.3 Who is entitled to attend the count?

The following people are entitled by law to attend the count:

- candidates and one guest
- election agents
- counting agents
- Electoral Commission representatives
- accredited observers
- any other person permitted to attend by the (Acting) Returning Officer

Members of the media and photographers who want to attend a count must obtain media accreditation on advance by completing the online accreditation form at www.eoni.org.uk/Elections/Media-Centre by 5pm on Wednesday 6 May 2015.
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13.4 How are the votes counted and the results announced?

There are four stages to the count process.

1) Receipt of ballot boxes

- Postal ballot boxes and ballot boxes from the polling stations arrive at the count venue.

2) Verification

- Staff count the postal ballot papers and verify that the number of ballot papers in postal ballot boxes matches the numbers recorded by the Deputy Returning Officer.
- Staff also 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.
- The Deputy Returning Officer produces a statement showing how many ballot papers have been received against how many ballot papers were expected.

3) Counting of the votes

- Staff sort ballot papers by candidate.
- Staff then count the number of votes cast for each candidate.
- The Deputy Returning Officer will share the provisional result with candidates and their agents. At this point, a candidate or their agent can ask for a recount of the votes. The Deputy Returning Officer can refuse the request if they think it's unreasonable.

4) Declaration of the result

- The Deputy Returning Officer will declare the number of votes cast for each candidate and will then announce the name of the candidate with the most votes as the elected Member of Parliament for the constituency.

13.5 How does the opening of postal votes fit into this process?

It's likely that several postal vote opening sessions will take place before polling day, as well as on polling day itself.

The Deputy Returning Officer must give candidates at least 48 hours' notice of when and where the sessions will take place. At each opening session, the Deputy Returning Officer will decide whether or not the date of birth and signatures provided by electors on their declaration of identity match the signature and date of birth previously provided and held on record. If the Deputy Returning Officer is not satisfied that they match, the vote is rejected.

Candidates can observe the process or appoint a postal voting agent to do so. Anyone attending an opening session must not attempt to look at identifying marks or numbers on ballot papers, disclose how any particular ballot paper has been marked or pass on any such information gained from the session.

All valid ballot papers are placed into ballot boxes and stored securely before being delivered to the count venue for counting after the close of poll.

13.6 What happens with spoiled ballot papers?

Once the verification phase of the count is complete, ballot papers will be sorted by candidate and any doubtful ballot papers will be identified. The Deputy Returning Officer will adjudicate any doubtful ballot papers in the presence of candidates and agents and the Commission has provided guidance to help them do this.

Spoilt ballot papers are sealed separately to other ballot papers and the Deputy Returning Officer will announce how many ballot papers were rejected after they have announced who has been elected as a Member of Parliament.

13.7 Can the result be challenged after it has been announced?

An election petition can be issued if someone wants to challenge a result. In most cases it must be presented within 21 days of the declaration of the result.

For more information on how a candidate could challenge the result of an election, see our Guidance for candidates and agents, Part 6, pages 5 – 6:
http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/179944/UKPGE-Part-6-After-the-declaration-of-results-NI.pdf

Appendix A - What happened at the 2010 UKPGE

To see our press release about how much political parties spent at the last UKPGE, click [here](#)

To see their spending returns and invoices, click [here](#)

To see our press release about how much candidates spent at the last UKPGE, click [here](#)

To see how much each candidate spent in specific parliamentary constituencies, click [here](#)