

Media Handbook

Local government elections in Northern Ireland

Thursday 2 May 2019

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Our channels

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Websites

electoralcommission.org.uk

Our corporate website has a dedicated [section for journalists](#) featuring our press releases and statements. It has information on political party donations in the run-up to the election and has a guidance section with information for candidates and those administering the election.

yourvotematters.co.uk

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

gov.uk/register-to-vote

This website is where the public can register to vote online. It is quick and easy to use. This is the first election in Northern Ireland in which people can register to vote online. As such we would encourage referring to this site in media coverage about the election to ensure members of the public know where they can register.

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

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1 Logistics

Roles and responsibilities at the poll

On 2 May voters in Northern Ireland will elect 462 councillors across the 11 local councils.

Name of council	Number of councillors to be elected
Antrim and Newtownabbey	40
Ards and North Down	40
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	41
Belfast	60
Causeway Coast and Glens	40
Derry and Strabane	40
Fermanagh and Omagh	40
Lisburn and Castlereagh	40
Mid and East Antrim	40
Mid Ulster	40
Newry, Mourne and Down	41

Local government elections are also taking place in England on 2 May 2019. For more information about these elections see our Media handbook for the local elections in England.

Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland

The Chief Electoral Officer, Virginia McVea, administers elections and compiles the register of electors in Northern Ireland. She 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 her duties by the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland.

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

Deputy Returning Officers (DROs)

Local Council Chief Executives are appointed as Deputy Returning Officers (DROs) at local council elections. The DROs act with the authority of the Returning Officer. Their responsibilities include:

- receiving candidate nominations
- publishing the statement of persons nominated and notice of poll
- printing ballot papers and corresponding number lists
- preparing ballot boxes
- managing the verification and count of ballot papers
- receiving returns and declarations of election expenses

Presiding Officers

Presiding Officers are appointed by EONI to run polling stations. Duties include organising the layout of the polling station, supervising poll clerks, issuing ballot papers, checking photographic ID, assisting voters, accounting for all ballot papers and ensuring that ballot boxes are transported securely to the count venue or a ballot box collection point.

The Electoral Commission

The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK. We work to promote public confidence in the democratic process and ensure its integrity. Our role in the May elections is:

- providing advice and guidance for candidates standing for election and their agents
- registering political parties
- promoting public awareness of the elections and how to take part in them
- reporting on the conduct of the elections

Election timetable

Event	Date and deadline (if not midnight)
Publication of notice of election	Tuesday 26 March
Regulated period for campaign spending by candidates begins	No earlier than Wednesday 27 March for candidates
Delivery of nomination papers	From Wednesday 27 March to 1pm on Monday 8 April
Deadline for withdrawals of nomination	1pm on Monday 8 April
Publication of statement of persons nominated	6:00pm on Monday 8 April or as soon as practicable thereafter
Deadline for applications to vote by post or proxy	5pm on Wednesday 10 April
Deadline to apply to register to vote	Friday 12 April
Polling day	7am – 10pm on Thursday 2 May
Election count	Verification of ballot papers will commence at 8am
Last day for submission of candidate spending returns	If result declared on 3 May: Friday 7 June If result declared on 4 May: Monday 10 June

2 Candidates

Becoming a candidate at a local election

Who can become a candidate?

Anyone that wants to become a candidate in the local elections on 2 May 2019 must be:

- at least 18 years old on the day of the candidate's nomination
- a British, Irish or qualifying Commonwealth citizen, or a citizen of a European Union country

They must also meet at least one of the following four qualifications:

- Be, and continue to be, registered as a local government elector in the local authority area that they are standing in from the day of their nomination onwards
- Occupy as owner or tenant any land or other premises in the local authority area that they are standing in during the whole of the 12 months before the day of their nomination and the day of election
- Their main or only place of work must be in the local authority area that they are standing in. This applies to the 12 months prior to the day of their nomination and the day of election
- Have lived in the local authority area that they are standing in during the whole of the 12 months before the day of their nomination and the day of election

Are there any rules barring a candidate from standing?

The rules around standing for election and the disqualifications that apply are complex. [The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland have produced guidance for candidates and agents](#) which contains information on what disqualifies someone from standing to be a candidate in May's elections.

When does someone become a candidate?

The earliest that a person can officially become a candidate is on the last day for the publication of notice of election, which is 26 March 2019. If a person has already declared themselves as a candidate at the election then they will officially become a candidate on this date.

If they declare after 26 March 2019 that they will be a candidate at the elections, then they become a candidate on that day, or the date they formally submit their nominations papers – whichever is earliest.

What does someone have to do to stand as a candidate?

All prospective candidates must submit the following to the Deputy Returning Officer by 1pm on Monday 8 April 2019:

- A completed nomination form. Prospective candidates cannot submit the nomination form until the date stated on the notice of election
- Their consent to nomination
- A certificate from a political party authorising them to stand (if they are standing for a registered political party)

In addition, local election candidates require the signatures of 10 registered electors for their respective electoral area.

[Further guidance for candidates and agents on standing for election](#) is available from EONI

Who are the candidates?

The deadline for prospective candidates to submit nomination papers is 1pm on Monday 8 April 2019. Each Deputy Returning Officer will publish a statement of persons nominated not later than 6pm on Monday 8 April 2019 (or as soon as practicable thereafter). This will usually be available on the respective local council website. Once this has been published, you will be able to see the full list of candidates for each council.

Campaigning at the election

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 influence the result of the 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, neither the Electoral Commission nor the EONI have any regulatory role in relation to the content of campaign material or what candidates say about each other.

Are there any electoral rules regarding campaign materials?

By law, candidates must use 'imprints' on all their printed campaign material. An imprint includes the name and address of the printer and promoter (the person who authorised the material to be printed). It must be included on all printed material such as posters, placards and leaflets. 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.

Though it is not a legal requirement, the Electoral Commission recommends that candidates, wherever possible, place an imprint on their electronic materials (e.g. websites, emails and social media platforms). Voters need to know who is targeting them with political messages online and we have called for the law to be changed to require this.

Can candidates see the electoral register?

Once someone becomes a candidate, they 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 District Electoral Area that they are contesting.

Candidates may only use the full electoral register to help them complete their nomination form, to campaign, and to check that donations they receive come from a permissible source.

Candidate spending limits and rules on accepting donations

What is the regulated period for the May elections?

The regulated period for the 2019 local government elections begins on the day after the date a person officially becomes a candidate and ends on polling day, 2 May 2019.

The earliest date a person can officially become a candidate is the last date for publication of the notice of election, which will be Tuesday 26 March 2019.

What are the spending limits?

For local government election candidates, the spending limit is calculated using a base figure of £600, plus 5p per local government elector in the district electoral area where the candidate is standing.

Joint candidates have lower spending limits, as they are sharing some of the costs. A joint candidate is someone standing in the same district electoral area who has the same election agent or uses the same campaign rooms or publishes joint material with another candidate.

In a district electoral area with two joint candidates each candidate recalculates their spending limit using the formula above and reducing it by 25%. If there are three or more joint candidates each candidate's spending limit is reduced by 33%. More information on this is available in [our guidance on candidate spending and donations at the local government elections](#).

To assist candidates and agents in calculating their spending limit for the election, the Deputy Returning Officer will be able to provide candidates with the number of electors in the relevant district electoral area.

The candidate or their agent must request this information in writing and the Deputy Returning Officer must provide it as soon as practicable after they receive their request.

What activities count towards the spending limit?

Candidate spending includes the costs of:

- advertising of any kind, such as posters, newspaper adverts, websites or YouTube videos
- unsolicited material sent to voters, such as letters, leaflets or emails that are not sent in response to specific queries
- transport costs, such as hire cars or public transport for the candidate's campaigner

- public meetings
- staff costs (e.g. an agent's salary, or staff seconded to a candidate)
- accommodation (e.g. a campaign office)
- administrative costs (e.g. telephone bills, stationery, photocopying and the use of databases)

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 your staff that you do not pay them for
- use of someone's main residence, provided free of charge
- use of someone's personal car or other means of transport acquired principally for that person's personal use and provided free of charge
- general computer equipment bought for the candidate's personal use

The UK Parliament has passed new legislation which means that costs reasonably attributable to a candidate's disability do not count as candidate spending. This legislation also means that a candidate's personal expenses will not count towards their spending limit, but candidates will have to report personal expenses after the election.

Who can make donations to candidates?

Anyone can make a donation worth £50 or less to candidates. Candidates are not required to declare details of the donors of donations with a value of £50 or less in their spending and donations return.

Candidates must ensure that any donation worth more than £50 is only accepted if it is from a permissible source. This applies to cash donations and donations in kind. 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 for candidates at the local elections are defined as:

- an individual on a UK electoral register
- a GB registered political party
- 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

The UK government has changed the law on who can donate or lend money to UK registered political parties. From the date of the UK's departure from the EU, expected to be on 29 March 2019, donations and loans can no longer be accepted from:

- companies incorporated in another EU member state
- individuals and organisations based in Gibraltar

There is an exception for parties on the Northern Ireland register, and regulated donees in Northern Ireland. The laws has not changed for them on accepting donations and loans from individuals and organisations based in the Republic of Ireland.

It remains possible for the UK government to defer, revoke or change these new laws. Party treasurers and regulated donees must make sure that they know the up to date position before accepting donations or loans that might be affected. We will update our website as soon as we know more.

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 above £50, made by the party to a candidate, must be reported in the candidate's spending return.

Who do candidates report their regulated spending to and when?

Candidates at the local elections must submit their campaign spending returns to their local Deputy Returning Officer within 35 days of the election result being declared.

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

What happens if a candidate exceeds their spending limit?

Allegations relating to the Electoral Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1962 (ELA), including candidate spending offences, are generally made to the police to consider.

Whilst the Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to monitor compliance with parts of the ELA relating to candidate and agent expenses, it is not legally empowered to investigate and impose sanctions for offences under the ELA.

What are the rules for non-party campaigners?

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

Under local campaigning rules, where a non-party campaigner campaigns for or against a candidate in a district electoral area certain rules apply to spending on this activity within the regulated period.

3 Electoral fraud

Voting offences

The Representation of the People Act 1983 specifies a number of criminal offences relating to electoral fraud. The PSNI is responsible for investigating any allegations that an offence may have taken place.

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.

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, dead or fictitious), 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. A person may also be guilty of undue influence if they impede or prevent any voter from freely exercising their right to vote – even where the attempt is unsuccessful.
- **Bribery** – A person is guilty of bribery if they directly or indirectly offer any reward (whether financial or otherwise) in order to induce any voter to vote or refrain from voting.
- **Treating** – A person is guilty of treating if either before, during, or after an election they directly or indirectly give or provide any food, drink, entertainment or provision to corruptly influence any voter to vote or refrain from voting. Treating requires a corrupt intent - it does not apply to ordinary hospitality.
- **False statements** – It is an offence to make or publish a false statement of fact about the personal character or conduct of a candidate in order to affect the return of a candidate at an election. False statements that are not about a candidate's personal character or conduct are not illegal under electoral law, but could be considered as libel or slander. It is an offence to knowingly provide a false statement on a nomination paper.
- **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 information in connection with registration and absent voting** – 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.

How confident can the electorate feel about postal and proxy voting?

Postal and proxy voters have to provide their signature, date of birth and National Insurance number when applying for an absent vote. If a postal vote is issued then the voter must also provide their signature and date of birth when casting their postal vote. Both of these records are checked against the information held on the electoral register. If the EONI is not satisfied that they match, the ballot paper is not counted.

Responsibilities for combatting electoral fraud

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

The Chief Electoral Officer works closely with the PSNI to prevent and detect electoral fraud. Deputy Returning Officers will also work closely with police in their local area to identify any concerns relating to the safety of the polls.

What is the Electoral Commission doing to prevent fraud at the 2019 elections?

The Commission works closely with Returning Officers and local police forces across the UK. The Commission is also working with Crimestoppers to make sure people can report concerns about electoral fraud anonymously by calling 0800 555 111. This includes making available a suite of resources as part of a campaign to raise awareness of and prevent electoral fraud.

The [Your Vote is Yours Alone campaign](#), which we are delivering in conjunction with Crimestoppers and the Cabinet Office, aims to reach people that may feel pressured into casting their vote a certain way.

The campaign's resources highlight what constitutes electoral fraud, and aim to empower people to not let it happen to them. They also encourage people to report anything that may be an offence to Crimestoppers.

Resources include a poster, a leaflet, online banners, video animations, social posts, template press releases and a social content schedule.

4 Voters

Registering to vote

Who can vote in 2 May elections?

A person can vote in the 2 May elections if they are on the local government register in an area where elections are taking place.

A person can register to vote if they are:

- aged 18 or over on polling day
- a British, Irish, EU or qualifying Commonwealth citizen

British or eligible Irish citizens living overseas who are registered as overseas electors cannot vote in local government elections. Service voters stationed abroad are still eligible to vote in local government elections.

What is the registration deadline?

The deadline to apply to register is Friday 12 April 2019.

What is the deadline for applying to vote by post or by proxy?

The deadline for applying for a postal or proxy vote is 5pm, Wednesday 10 April 2019. Application forms are available from the [EONI website](#).

How can someone register to vote?

Voters in Northern Ireland can now go online to apply to register at www.gov.uk/register-to-vote. People can still apply by completing a paper registration form if they prefer. They can contact the EONI for forms or download them their website.

Can someone register at two different addresses?

In some cases you may be eligible to register to vote at two different addresses, for example, if you own two homes or if you are a student living away from home. It is for the Chief Electoral Officer to determine whether someone is eligible to register.

If an individual is registered to vote in two different electoral areas, then at May's local elections, they are legally entitled to vote in both of those electoral areas.

However, it is an offence to vote twice in the same electoral area, for example at a UK general election.

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 home address or their barracks in the usual way, 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.

Can prisoners vote?

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

In some limited circumstances prisoners released on temporary licence are eligible to register to vote.

The voting process

When will polling stations be open?

All polling stations open at 7am and close at 10pm.

What happens if someone is in a queue to enter a polling station at 10pm?

Any voter who arrives at their polling station before 10pm and is in a queue waiting to vote at 10pm **will be able to vote**.

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

What voting system is used in the local government elections?

The electoral system used to elect councilors in Northern Ireland is the Single Transferable Vote (STV).

How do voters complete their ballot paper for the local government elections?

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.

Voting in person

Registered voters can visit their local **polling station** between 7am and 10pm on Thursday 2 May to cast their votes. Voters should arrive in plenty of time to avoid missing out on having their say.

- Before polling day, voters will be sent a poll card which includes details of where their polling station is
- Voters can only vote at the polling station specified on this card
- Polling station staff will be on hand to explain the ballot paper(s) and how to vote
- Voters do not need to take their poll card with them to the polling station but doing so will speed up the process

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.

Voting by post

If are unable to go to a polling station (for example if they are ill or away on holiday) then they may apply for a postal vote. To vote by post, registered electors need to apply for a postal vote before 5pm, Wednesday 10 April 2019.

- Postal ballot papers will be sent directly to voters about a week before polling day
- Voters should complete their ballot papers and send them back straight away, so they arrive before 10pm on Thursday 2 May
- Votes arriving after 10pm on Thursday 2 May will not be counted.
- Voters must also remember to complete the postal voting statement – with their signature and date of birth or their vote will not be counted

Voting by proxy

Voters can also apply for a 'proxy vote' if they are unable to go to a polling station. This means they ask someone they trust to vote on their behalf for the candidate(s) they wish to vote for. Applications forms to appoint a proxy must be returned to the EONI by 5pm, Wednesday 10 April 2019.

What provisions are made to make voting more accessible to voters with disabilities?

In our guidance we recommend that all necessary steps are taken to ensure that polling stations are laid out with the voter in mind. In particular, the needs of voters with a range of disabilities should be taken into account. The positioning of all of the required furniture and equipment, as well as where all of the notices should be displayed, should also be considered, along with the placement of signage within the polling station and external signage.

It is a legal requirement to provide a tactile voting device at every polling station. The tactile template is a device that allows someone who is blind or partially sighted to mark the ballot paper themselves, once the details on the ballot paper have been read out either by their companion or the Presiding Officer. In addition, a large-print version of the ballot paper must be displayed inside the polling station for the assistance of voters who are partially sighted. Enlarged hand-held copies, marked as 'sample', must also be available to anyone who requires them.

The Commission works closely with the Accessibility of Elections Group, run by the Cabinet Office, to consider how voting can be made more accessible. [The Commission has responded to a UK Government Call for Evidence](#) with recommendations on how elections can be made more accessible.

[The UK Government's response to the Call for Evidence](#) was published in August 2018. It lists key findings and actions to be taken with the Accessibility of Elections Group to improve the accessibility of future elections

How accessible are the local elections?

We work to ensure voters know everything they need to know about the process of casting their vote.

In November 2017, we released our ['Elections for everyone' accessibility report](#) where we heard from people across the UK with learning and physical disabilities as well as people living with mental illness about their experiences with the voting and registration process.

Most people with disabilities told us that they are happy with voting at elections. But people with disabilities don't always know about their voting rights and face different types of barriers when they want to register to vote and cast their vote.

We have recommended that the Government should look at different ways that people with disabilities can vote so that they have greater flexibility and choice.

Is it mandatory to use pencils in polling stations? Can a pen be used?

There is nothing in law which states whether a pen or a pencil should be used to mark a ballot paper. Pencils have been used to mark ballot papers for practical reasons: for example, with ink pens there is a chance the ink may dry or spill. Also, ink may cause some transfer of the mark the voter has made on the ballot paper when they fold it, thus potentially leading to a rejection as it may make the voters intention unclear. Should a voter wish to, they are able to use a pen to mark their ballot paper.

Can voters take selfies or other photos in the polling station?

The law relating to obtaining information in polling stations and disclosing such information is complex. Given the risk that someone taking a photo inside a polling station may be in breach of the law, whether intentionally or not, our advice is against taking any photos inside polling stations.

Is it ok for someone to take a picture of their postal ballot and post it on social media showing how they have voted?

Postal ballot papers are treated differently in electoral law, compared to polling station ballot papers. A postal voter may take a picture of their own postal ballot paper and publicise it (including via social media).

However, while the postal voter themselves may publicise the information, if someone else persuades or induces them to make this information available, they would be committing an offence. If there are any suggestions or allegations that this could be happening, the person making the complaint should be advised to report the matter to the police.

Raising awareness of voter registration

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

The Commission's campaign for Northern Ireland launched on 21 February and runs until the registration deadline of 12 April. A separate voter registration campaign is also running in England

Campaign advertising will be spread across TV, radion, video-on-demand, outdoor and social channels. It will also be supported by dedicated organic PR and social activity covering both registration and wider voter information.

Additionally, the Commission is providing resources for partner organisations to use as part of their public engagement work on key voter registration and information messages.

How can other organisations help encourage people to register to vote?

As at all recent elections, the Electoral Commission is working with a range of partner organisations – from the corporate, public and voluntary sectors – to try and reach traditionally under-registered voters and encourage them to register to vote.

This spans more bespoke partnership work for specific audiences to providing more generic resources for them to use.

Any organisation that would like to promote these messages should visit our [Your Vote Matters website](#), where they can also sign up for our voter registration newsletter, 'Roll Call'.

5 Count events

The count and declaration of results

Who is responsible for the count?

The relevant Deputy Returning Officer will have overall responsibility for the counting of the votes at their respective election.

Where are the counts taking place?

Council	Count venue
Antrim and Newtownabbey	Valley Leisure Centre, Newtownabbey
Ards and North Down	Aurora Aquatic and Leisure Complex, Bangor
Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	Banbridge Leisure Centre
Belfast	Belfast City Hall
Causeway Coast and Glens	Coleraine Leisure Centre
Derry and Strabane	Foyle Arena
Fermanagh and Omagh	Omagh Leisure Complex
Lisburn and Castlereagh	Lagan Valley Leisureplex, Lisburn
Mid and East Antrim	Seven Towers Leisure Centre, Ballmena
Mid Ulster	Meadowbank Sports Arena, Magherafelt
Newry, Mourne and Down	Newry Leisure Centre

When will counts start?

The count will commence at 8am at all count venue with the verification of ballot papers. Unused ballot papers will be verified the night before.

Who can attend the count?

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

- The relevant local government Returning Officer and their staff
- candidates and one guest
- election agents
- counting agents
- Electoral Commission representatives
- accredited observers
- the elected mayor (only at local authority mayoral election counts)
- any other person permitted to attend by the returning officer

Members of the media and photographers who want to attend a count must contact the relevant local Deputy Returning Officer to request permission to attend the count and declaration of the results.

How are the votes counted and the results announced?

There are four stages to the count process.

1. **Receipt of ballot boxes:** Ballot boxes from the polling stations arrive at the count venue following the close of poll. Postal voting ballot boxes are also sent to the count venue from the EONI. All ballot boxes are securely stored overnight
2. **Verification:**
 - a. At 8 am staff count the ballot papers and verify that the number of ballot papers in each ballot box matches the numbers recorded on the Presiding Officer's ballot paper accounts
 - b. 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**
 - a. Once verification is completed the ballot papers from each ballot box are mixed with ballot papers from other ballot boxes.
 - b. Staff then sort the ballot papers by the first preference vote for each candidate.
 - c. Staff count the number of first preference votes cast for each candidate.
 - d. 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.

- e. The total number of valid ballot papers is then divided by the number of candidates to be elected in the district electoral area 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: 8,500

Number of candidates to be elected in district electoral area: 5

Quota: $(8,500 / 6) + 1 = 1,417$

- f. 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. If no candidate exceeds the quota then the candidate(s) 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.
 - g. 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 declare updates after each stage of the count and announce which candidates are deemed elected or excluded from the count. Once all of the seats for the district electoral area have been filled the Deputy Returning will make an official declaration of the successful candidates.

What happens with spoilt ballot papers?

Once the verification phase of the count is complete, ballot papers will be sorted by the first preference vote for each 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 then the returning officer will announce how many ballot papers were rejected after they have announced the results of the election.

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 EONI will give notice of when and where the sessions will take place. At each opening session, appointed EONI staff will decide whether or not the date of birth and signatures provided by electors on their postal voting statements match the signature and date of birth provided at the time of registration. If they are not satisfied that they match, the vote is rejected.

Candidates can observe the process or appoint a postal voting agent to do so. Ballot papers are handled 'face down' at postal vote opening sessions. 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.

Can the result be challenged after it has been announced?

Someone can challenge the result of an election by issuing an election petition. This is a legal action and will be adjudicated by a judge in court.

A petition at a local government election must normally be presented within 21 calendar days after the day on which the election was held. Further time may be allowed in certain circumstances.

[The Law Commissions published a joint interim report](#) on 4 February 2016 recommending that the process for challenging elections should be modernised, making it easier for parties to understand and use, and that judges be given the power, in appropriate cases, to limit the potential costs for challengers. This is supported by the Electoral Commission.

Can I film at count events?

Members of the media and photographers wishing to attend and film at count events must seek advance permission from the relevant local Deputy Returning Officer.