

# Guidance for observers of UK Parliamentary general elections

**November 2019**

This guidance is for electoral observers who have been accredited by the Electoral Commission. It includes information on what elections are taking place, who does what at these elections and what to expect at the electoral processes you are entitled to observe.

If you want to apply to become an accredited observer you can find out how to do so on our website here: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/observing-elections-and-referendums>

# What elections are taking place?

1.1 On Thursday 12 December 2019 there will be a general election to elect the UK Parliament. This guidance is for accredited observers in England, Scotland and Wales. Separate guidance is available for observers in Northern Ireland.

## What can I observe?

1.2 As an accredited observer you are entitled to attend:

- the issue and receipt of postal ballot papers
- the poll
- the verification and counting of the votes

1.3 We have published a [Code of Practice](#) for electoral observers. You must comply with the standards of behaviour set out in this Code.

1.4 You do not need to tell electoral officials that you want to observe proceedings. However, if you do tell them, they may be able to provide you with some relevant local information, for example a list of polling stations. You can still make unannounced visits or change your plans if you want to.

## Who can vote in these elections?

1.5 A person can vote in these elections if they are:

- included on the electoral register
- 18 years of age or over on the day of election
- a British, Irish or qualifying Commonwealth citizen
- resident at an address in the UK (or a UK citizen living abroad who has been registered to vote in the UK in the last 15 years)

## What voting method will be used?

1.6 There are 650 constituencies across the UK which will each return one Member of Parliament (MP) to the House of Commons.

1.7 The first-past-the-post voting system is used for these elections.

1.8 Voters receive a ballot paper listing all the candidates standing in their constituency and can vote for one candidate. When ballot papers are counted the candidate with the most votes in that constituency is elected. Most candidates are from a political party but there can also be independent candidates.

1.9 After a general election, the leader of the party with the most MPs is asked by the Queen to become Prime Minister and to form a government that will run the country. The leader of the party with the second highest number of MPs becomes the Leader of the Opposition.

# Who does what at a general election?

## The Returning Officer and (Acting) Returning Officer

1.10 At a UK Parliamentary election in England and Wales the Returning Officer is a largely ceremonial position. Most duties of the Returning Officer are discharged by the (Acting) Returning Officer who is normally a senior officer of the local authority.

1.11 In Scotland, there is no Returning Officer with a ceremonial role. The Returning Officer is the person responsible for administering the election. The Returning Officer for a UK Parliamentary election in Scotland is the same person who has been appointed as Returning Officer for the election of councillors in the local authority in which the constituency is situated.

1.12 We use the term (Acting) Returning Officer in relation to Acting Returning Officers in England and Wales and Returning Officers in Scotland. (Acting) Returning Officers are independent of the authority in respect of their electoral functions.

1.13 You will be able to contact the (Acting) Returning Officer for your area by contacting your local elections office. Addresses and telephone numbers of all elections offices can be found on our [website](#).

1.14 The (Acting) Returning Officer will offer briefings and training sessions ahead of an election for candidates standing for election and for staff working on the election. You may be able to attend these sessions which will help you to understand the processes that you are entitled to attend and observe

## The Electoral Registration Officer

1.15 The Electoral Registration Officer is responsible for maintaining the register of electors and absent voters' lists for their area. The Electoral Registration Officer is normally a senior officer of a local authority and may also be the (Acting) Returning Officer. You can find contact details for Electoral Registration Officers on our [website](#).

## The Electoral Commission

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

1.17 We register political parties and non-party campaigners, monitor and publish donations to political parties and regulate spending at certain elections. We also accredit observers to attend election proceedings.

1.18 We do not run elections but have responsibility for providing advice and assistance on electoral matters to all those involved in elections. We also promote voter awareness.

1.19 Our contact details are:

The Electoral Commission

3 Bunhill Row  
London  
EC1Y 8YZ

Tel: 020 7271 0500

Email: [info@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:info@electoralcommission.org.uk)

Website: [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)

## Candidates

1.20 Candidates must submit a nomination paper and consent to nomination to the (Acting) Returning Officer during the nomination period and no later than 4:00pm on Thursday 14 November 2019.

1.21 The (Acting) Returning Officer must publish the Statement of Persons Nominated no later than 5:00pm on Thursday 14 November 2019. This will show the names and descriptions (if any) of the persons standing for election in each constituency.

## Postal voting

1.22 Electors can apply to vote by post. The (Acting) Returning Officer starts to send postal voting packs to postal voters around two weeks before polling day. Voters can return their packs via the post, to their local council or hand them in to polling stations on polling day. Completed postal voting packs must be returned by 10pm on polling day.

1.23 You are entitled to attend both the issuing of postal voting packs and postal vote opening sessions.

1.24 The (Acting) Returning Officer will be able to tell you when and where postal votes will be issued and opened.

## What happens at a postal vote issuing session?

1.25 There are likely to be several sessions for issuing postal votes. These could take place at an external printers. The (Acting) Returning Officer can tell you when and where the issuing sessions will be held.

1.26 At the issuing session, postal voting packs will be put together. The packs will include:

- **Envelope A** – this is the envelope that the elector returns their ballot paper in. It is marked with the letter 'A' and the words 'ballot paper envelope'
- **Envelope B** – this is the envelope that the elector will use to return the ballot paper envelope and the postal voting statement. It is marked with the letter 'B' and the address of the (Acting) Returning Officer
- **The postal voting statement** – this contains the elector's name, the number of the ballot paper issued to them, instructions on how to vote by post and space for the elector to sign and provide their date of birth

- **The ballot paper**

1.27 Postal voting packs will then be delivered to electors, either by hand or by post.

## When will postal votes be opened?

1.28 It is likely that there will be several postal vote opening sessions before polling day, as well as on polling day itself. The (Acting) Returning Officer can tell you when and where the sessions will take place.

1.29 There will also be a final opening session held after the polls have closed. Any postal votes handed in to polling stations are opened at this session. This session may be held at the count venue or in another location. The (Acting) Returning Officer can tell you the location for the final opening.

## What happens at a postal vote opening session?

1.30 Postal voters must complete and return a postal voting statement which includes their signature and date of birth, as well as their ballot paper.

1.31 The (Acting) Returning Officer will decide whether or not the date of birth and signature provided by electors on their postal voting statements matches the signature and date of birth previously provided by the elector and held on their records. If they do not match, the postal vote will be rejected.

1.32 A very small number of voters will have been granted a waiver because they are unable to sign or provide a consistent signature due to a disability or an inability to read or write. These voters do not need to sign their postal voting statement.

1.33 The (Acting) Returning Officer will explain the postal vote opening process to you. They may issue you with information on the procedures to be followed during the opening session, including instructions on what you can and cannot do at the session. You should comply with any instructions that the (Acting) Returning Officer has given.

1.34 The postal vote opening process can be summarised as follows:

- 1 Postal votes are brought to the opening session in ballot boxes
- 2 The covering envelopes (envelope B) are taken out and counted
- 3 The total number of covering envelopes is recorded
- 4 Covering envelopes (envelope B) are divided between teams of opening staff
- 5 Staff open each covering envelope (envelope B) and remove the postal voting statement and the sealed ballot paper envelope (envelope A)
- 6 Staff check that the number on the postal voting statement matches the number on envelope A
- 7 If the numbers match, staff check that the elector has provided a signature and a date of birth (without checking that they are the elector's at this stage).  
Postal voting statements without a signature and date of birth cause the postal vote to be rejected.

- 8 If the statement **or** ballot paper envelope is missing, or the numbers on the statement and ballot paper envelope do not match, the document(s) are set aside, recorded and stored in secure packets
- 9 The (Acting) Returning Officer will verify the dates of birth and signatures provided on the statements
- 10 The (Acting) Returning Officer must be satisfied that the dates of birth and signatures on the statements match those previously provided and held on record
- 11 Following verification of the signatures and dates of birth, postal voting statements are removed from the tables
- 12 Staff open the ballot paper envelopes (envelope A) and remove the ballot paper
- 13 Staff check that the numbers on the back of the ballot paper matches the number on the ballot paper envelope (envelope A)
- 14 Valid ballot papers (**not** votes) are counted and the total number is recorded
- 15 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

## Duty to maintain secrecy

1.35 The (Acting) Returning Officer will give you a copy of the statutory Requirement of Secrecy. Anyone attending a postal vote issuing or opening session must comply with this.

1.36 Ballot papers will be kept face down throughout a postal vote opening session. Anyone attending an opening session must not:

- attempt to see how individual ballot papers have been marked
- attempt to look at identifying marks or numbers on ballot papers
- disclose how any particular ballot paper has been marked
- pass on any such information gained from the session

1.37 Anyone found guilty of breaching these requirements can face an unlimited fine, or may be imprisoned for up to six months.

## Observing at polling stations

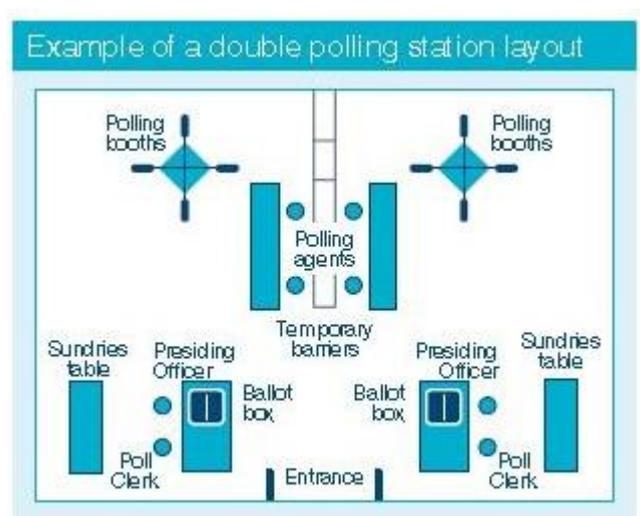
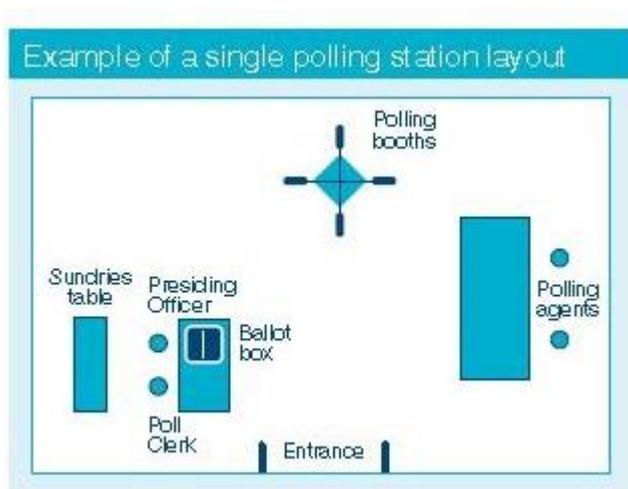
1.38 You are entitled to observe inside polling stations. The (Acting) Returning Officer will be able to provide you with a list of all polling stations in the area where you want to observe.

### When are polling stations open?

1.39 Polling stations will be open between 7am and 10pm on Thursday 12 December 2019. You are permitted to arrive shortly before this to observe the sealing of the ballot box(es) prior to the poll opening.

### What will the inside of the polling station look like?

1.40 The layout within each polling station may differ, but it may look similar to the images below:



## Who can vote at polling stations?

1.41 Any person on the polling station's electoral register can vote at the polling station unless:

- they are a registered postal voter
- they are a registered proxy voter and their proxy has already voted for them or has applied to vote on their behalf by post
- they are not 18 years of age or older on polling day

1.42 Electors receive a poll card before the election telling them where they can vote. Most electors do not need to take their poll card to the polling station in order to vote. The only electors who need to bring a poll card with them to vote are those who have registered anonymously because of risks to their safety.

1.43 Registered postal voters cannot be issued with a ballot paper at the polling station. They can return their completed postal ballot pack to any polling station in the constituency or to the (Acting) Returning Officer at the elections office.

1.44 Postal ballot packs returned to polling stations must be handed to polling station staff and not placed in the ballot box. Polling station staff will keep any postal votes secure until they are collected.

## Who is allowed to be in the polling station?

1.45 The following people are entitled by law to be present in a polling station:

- voters
- persons under the age of 18 who accompany voters
- companions of disabled voters
- candidates and their election agents
- polling agents
- the (Acting) Returning Officer and their staff
- the Presiding Officer and clerks
- police officers and community support officers on duty at the polling station
- Electoral Commission representatives
- observers accredited by the Electoral Commission

## What do polling agents do?

1.46 Candidates can appoint polling agents to be present at any polling station. Only one polling agent for each candidate may be present at the same time.

1.47 The main role of a polling agent is to detect personation (when an individual votes as someone else – whether that person is living or dead, or is a fictitious person).

1.48 Other duties that the polling agents may undertake include:

- checking that the ballot box is empty at 7am
- being present when the Presiding Officer marks a ballot paper on behalf of a voter

- being present at the close of poll to observe the sealing up of the ballot box and other packages
- attaching their own seal to the ballot box or any packet in addition to the official seal

## What happens in a polling station?

1.49 Polling station staff will:

- ask voters for their name and address, and make sure they are eligible to vote
- mark a straight line against the voter's entry on the register of electors
- call out the number and name of the elector
- write the elector number on a list next to the number of the ballot paper to be issued
- ensure the ballot paper includes the official mark (e.g. a barcode or watermark)
- fold the ballot paper and then hand it to the voter unfolded so that they can see all of the options on the ballot paper

1.50 There may be more than one election taking place, such as council by-election. If this is the case, polling station staff will issue voters with a ballot paper for each election. Sometimes an elector will not be entitled to vote at all of the polls taking place.

1.51 Where there is more than one election, a single ballot box may be used for all of the elections or one box may be used for each separate election.

## What assistance is available for voters with disabilities?

1.52 There are a number of facilities available at polling stations to assist voters with disabilities:

- a polling booth with a shelf at a height suitable for people in wheelchairs
- a polling booth with extra lighting
- a large print version of the ballot paper (for reference purposes only)
- a tactile voting device to help voters with sight loss to mark their ballot paper

1.53 If a voter is unable to mark the ballot paper themselves because they have a disability, the Presiding Officer or a companion can mark it for them. The voter must tell the polling station staff that this is how they want to vote and the reason why.

1.54 If a companion marks the ballot paper for a voter, they will be asked to fill in a form. A companion cannot assist more than two electors to vote at an election.

## Who are Tellers?

1.55 Tellers stand outside polling stations and record the elector numbers of people who have voted. They can then identify likely supporters who have not voted yet and encourage them to vote before the close of poll.

1.56 Tellers have no legal status and voters can refuse to give information to them.

## What happens after polls close?

1.57 Polls close at 10:00pm. Any voters waiting in a queue at their polling station at 10pm will be allowed to vote, even if they haven't been issued with a ballot paper yet.

1.58 Once all voters who have been issued with a ballot paper have voted, the Presiding Officer must seal the ballot box. Candidates, agents and polling agents can also add their own seal if they want to.

1.59 The Presiding Officer must then complete a number of official forms:

- the ballot paper account (this states how many ballot papers were issued)
- the list of voters with disabilities assisted by companions
- the list of votes marked by the Presiding Officer
- the statement of the number of voters whose votes were marked by the Presiding Officer
- the statement of the number of postal votes delivered to the polling station
- the list of tendered votes

1.60 The Presiding Officer must take the following to the count venue without delay:

- the ballot box(es)
- envelope containing any postal votes handed into the station
- official forms
- election stationery
- all other materials

## Duty to maintain secrecy in the polling station

1.61 Anyone attending a polling station must maintain the secrecy of the ballot. In particular, the following information must not be disclosed:

- the name or electoral number of who has or has not voted
- the number or other unique identifying mark on the ballot paper

1.62 Anyone attending a polling station must not try to determine how a voter has voted or who they are about to vote for.

1.63 A polling agent can mark off on their copy of the register of electors those voters who have applied for ballot papers. If the polling agent leaves the polling station during the hours of polling, they must leave the marked copy of the register in the polling station to ensure that secrecy requirements are not breached.

## Observing the verification and count

1.64 You are entitled to attend the verification and count. You are only permitted to observe the process. You are not allowed to enter the restricted area where staff count

the votes. The (Acting) Returning Officer has the right to limit the number of observers who may be present at any one time during the verification and count.

1.65 The (Acting) Returning Officer will be able to tell you the time and location of the verification and count. Observers do not need to give advance notice that they are going to attend.

## Who can attend the count?

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

- the (Acting) Returning Officer and their staff
- candidates, plus one guest per candidate
- election agents
- counting agents
- Electoral Commission representatives
- observers accredited by the Electoral Commission
- any other person permitted by the (Acting) Returning Officer

1.67 The (Acting) Returning Officer may allow representatives of the media to attend the verification and count. They must not interfere with the process or compromise the secrecy of the vote.

## What do counting agents do?

1.68 Counting agents have a number of important roles to play at the count:

- they observe the counting process and make sure that it is accurate
- they can draw to the attention of count staff any doubtful ballot papers
- if they disagree with a decision by the (Acting) Returning Officer to reject a ballot paper, they can ask the (Acting) Returning Officer to mark on the ballot paper “rejection objected to”
- if a count is suspended for any reason, counting agents can add their seals when the (Acting) Returning Officer seals the ballot boxes and envelopes.

## What is verification?

1.69 After polling stations close at 10pm the ballot boxes will be delivered to the count venue. Postal ballot papers previously received and opened will also be brought to the venue in sealed ballot boxes.

1.70 All ballot papers must then be verified. Verification has two main purposes:

- to make sure and show that all ballot papers issued at polling stations and all the returned postal ballot papers have been brought to the count
- to provide the figure that should match the result of the count

1.71 The number of ballot papers in each box will be compared with the number on the ballot paper account. If the number of ballot papers in each box matches the ballot paper account the verification of that box is complete.

1.72 If the numbers do not match, the ballot papers will be recounted and the documentation checked again. This process will continue until the (Acting) Returning Officer is satisfied as to the actual number of ballot papers to be included in the count.

1.73 The number of ballot papers in each box will be recorded on the verification statement.

## How are the votes counted?

1.74 After the verification stage is complete, the (Acting) Returning Officer must mix the ballot papers before sorting and counting the votes.

1.75 Count staff will then sort the ballot papers into votes for each candidate.

1.76 The ballot papers should be visible at all times to any candidates, agents and observers present.

1.77 Any doubtful ballot papers should be placed aside for adjudication.

## What are doubtful ballot papers?

1.78 A doubtful ballot paper is a ballot paper that has not been completed in accordance with the instructions. During the count, these ballot papers will be placed aside. The (Acting) Returning Officer will adjudicate these ballot papers regularly throughout the count to determine whether the intention of the voter clearly appears on the ballot paper.

1.79 An announcement will be made that an adjudication on doubtful ballot papers is about to be made. The (Acting) Returning Officer will decide whether each doubtful ballot paper is valid in the presence of candidates, agents and observers. You can attend the adjudication but it will not be delayed if you are not present.

1.80 The (Acting) Returning Officer will inform those present whether or not each doubtful ballot paper is valid and the reason for their decision. The (Acting) Returning Officer's decision is final and can only be challenged by an election petition.

1.81 Any doubtful ballot papers that are declared as valid must be counted and included in the total number of votes cast for the appropriate candidate.

1.82 A ballot paper will not be counted if it:

- is unmarked
- does not contain the official mark
- contains votes for more than one candidate
- contains any mark or writing that can identify the voter
- does not indicate the voter's intention with certainty

1.83 The (Acting) Returning Officer must mark the word "rejected" on any ballot paper that is rejected and must draw up a statement showing the number of ballot papers rejected for these reasons.

## What happens after the votes are counted?

1.84 After staff have finished counting the votes, the (Acting) Returning Officer will share the provisional result with the candidates and their agents. They may ask the (Acting) Returning Officer to recount the votes although the (Acting) Returning Officer can refuse to do so if they think the request is unreasonable.

1.85 The (Acting) Returning Officer will then declare the candidate with the most votes to be elected.

## What happens if candidates have the same number of votes?

1.86 If two or more candidates have the same number of votes, the (Acting) Returning Officer must decide between them by drawing lots.

## Duty to maintain secrecy

1.87 Anyone attending the count has a duty to maintain the secrecy of the count. In particular, anyone attending must not:

- ascertain or attempt to ascertain number or other unique identifying mark on the back of any ballot paper
- communicate any information obtained at the count as to the candidate for whom any vote is given on any particular ballot paper

## Submitting feedback

1.88 We welcome feedback from your electoral observations and on your experiences of the Electoral Commission's observer scheme which you can submit using our [feedback form](#).

1.89 If you want to submit feedback on these elections, the deadline for feedback to be considered is Friday 3 January 2020.

1.90 Feedback may be shared with relevant (Acting) Returning Officers to help improve the running of elections and the observer scheme.

1.91 You may find it helpful to print a copy of the [feedback form](#) in advance to take with you when observing.

1.92 If you would like to send feedback in a different format please email [observers@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:observers@electoralcommission.org.uk)