

Media handbook

FAQ on the May 2021 elections in Great Britain in the context of COVID-19

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This media handbook has been developed to hold information on the specific provisions and measures that have been introduced in order to hold Covid-safe elections on 6 May 2021. The electoral community have taken steps to help everyone take part safely and confidently, and you can find further information about these as well as how the elections will run in this document.

The Electoral Commission has produced handbooks detailing the electoral rules in place for all elections taking place in Great Britain on Thursday, 6 May. These can be found on our website.

The Electoral Commission provides comprehensive [guidance](#) to support electoral administrators, parties, campaigners, candidates and agents, as they prepare for upcoming elections. This year it has supplemented core guidance with additional [specific guidance on the safe running of the polls](#) in the context of COVID-19. This guidance has been developed in consultation with public health bodies and the UK's governments, as well as others in the electoral community. While public health restrictions may have a bearing on preparations for these elections, they are not set out in electoral law, and they are not enforced by the Electoral Commission.

Voting

In-person voting

Is voting in person safe?

Polling stations will be safe places to vote in May. Voters who choose to vote in person can help to keep themselves and others safe by:

- wearing a face covering
- bringing their own pen or pencil
- sanitising their hands when entering and leaving the polling station
- keeping a safe distance

Voters should not attend the polling station if they have symptoms of COVID-19, or if they have been asked to self-isolate.

How will polling station staff ensure voters understand what they need to do to stay safe on polling day?

Returning Officers are putting arrangements in place to ensure that polling stations are safe places to vote, and to help voters understand what they need to do to keep themselves and others safe.

There will be signage at polling stations with reminders about social distancing, hygiene and face coverings, and asking anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19 to stay at home. Voters will also be encouraged to sanitise their hands when entering and leaving the polling station, and will be offered a face covering if they do not have one.

Staff will be responsible for managing the flow of voters into and out of the station, as well as any queues that may form outside, to ensure that social distancing can be maintained.

Further information can be found in the guidance that the Electoral Commission has produced to support electoral administrators with preparing for and delivering the May 2021 polls during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Commission has produced [supplementary guidance for Returning Officers](#) on key aspects of the election process, including polling station set-up.

In addition, the Commission has developed polling station handbooks for each set of elections, designed to assist polling station staff. They describe the procedures to be followed and also contain specific guidance to help ensure that polling stations are safe

places to vote and work during the COVID-19 pandemic. This guidance has been developed in close consultation with public health bodies.

Polling station handbooks

- [Local government and PCC elections in England](#)
- [PCC elections in England and Wales](#)
- [Local government and combined authority mayoral elections in England](#)
- [Mayor of London and London Assembly elections](#)
- [Scottish Parliament election](#)
- [Senedd and PCC elections](#)

How can social distancing be maintained in a polling station?

Returning Officers are putting arrangements in place to help maintain social distancing within the polling station. We advise them to consider floor markings inside and outside the polling station to help manage queues and to maintain social distance between staff members and voters, and also to establish a one-way system around the polling station wherever possible. Staff will be responsible for managing the flow of voters into and out of the station, as well as any queues that may form outside, to ensure that social distancing can be maintained.

More information can be found in our [supplementary guidance for Returning Officers](#) on key aspects of the election process, including polling station set-up.

Will voters have to bring their own pen or pencil?

We are encouraging all voters to bring their own pen or pencil, in order to minimise contact.

There will be clean pencils available at the polling station for those who forget to bring their own.

Will people be turned away if they go into the polling station without wearing a mask?

We are encouraging all voters to wear a face covering in order to keep themselves and others safe. Polling station staff will have spare face coverings available for anyone who forgets to bring one.

Polling station staff will not prevent voters from entering a polling station and voting if they do not wear a face covering.

Will polling station locations change?

Electoral administrators are taking steps to ensure their polling station venues allow for the additional public health measures to be accommodated. As part of this, they may have reviewed their polling stations since the last elections, and there may be some changes to polling stations if venues become unavailable or so that they have more space to enable social distancing.

Voters will be able to check the location of their polling station on their poll card. The Commission encourages voters to familiarise themselves with the location of their polling station before 6 May. Voters can also find their polling station on the [Commission's website](#), where they can input their postcode to get information on elections in their area.

Is it safe to handle paper at the polling station?

Everyone handling paper and working with shared documents – whether voters or polling station staff – should follow public health guidelines. This will include washing hands regularly and avoiding touching their face, particularly after handling paper.

Absent voting

What happens if voters fall ill with COVID-19 or need to self-isolate at the last minute?

Anyone who is self-isolating or becomes unwell as a result of COVID-19 shortly before polling day, or on the day itself, need not miss out on their vote.

Voters will be able to apply for an emergency proxy up until 5pm on polling day, so someone they trust can vote on their behalf. They can arrange this by speaking to the electoral registration team at their local council, and can find contact details via [the postcode look-up tool on the Electoral Commission's website](#).

Campaigning and spending

Is it safe for parties or campaigners to campaign face to face/door-to-door during the current lockdown restrictions?

Political parties and campaigners will want to ensure that their campaigning activities are within COVID-19 restrictions in place across Great Britain and consistent with public health advice.

The UK's governments' approaches to elections taking place in Great Britain during Covid-19 can be found online:

- [Elections taking place in England](#)
- [Scottish Parliament elections](#)
- [Senedd elections](#)

Any restrictions in place to manage risks to public health are not set out in electoral law, and so they are not enforced by the Electoral Commission. We are not, therefore, able to provide advice on the legality of particular campaign activity.

Can candidates hand out masks or hand sanitiser to voters?

Yes, as long as they are doing so to assist voters generally, and not aiming to influence anyone to vote, or to vote in a particular way.

In electoral law, offering incentives or rewards for voting is an offence known as treating. The rules are designed to ensure that no one is being influenced to vote in a particular way.

A person is guilty of treating if either before, during, or after an election they offer food, drink or entertainment to corruptly influence any voter. Treating requires a corrupt intent - it does not apply to ordinary hospitality.

A person is guilty of bribery if they directly or indirectly offer any reward (financial or otherwise) in order to induce any voter to vote or refrain from voting.

Offences such as treating or bribery are a matter for the police to investigate, who will look at each individual case.

Does a face mask handed out by a party, candidate or non-party campaigner need an imprint?

Face coverings which are not campaign material do not require an imprint.

If items such as face coverings or hand sanitisers are used as campaign material to promote the candidate, party or campaigner, for instance with party or candidate branding, they must carry an imprint to show the person or organisation that has paid for it.

In addition, someone wearing a political slogan when going into a polling station, with the intention of voting, may be asked to cover it up by the Presiding Officer as campaigning inside polling stations is not permitted.

The only people allowed to wear a rosette are the candidates and their polling agents. Any rosette must be plain and not refer to the candidate or bear a slogan.

Spending

Would face masks or hand sanitiser have to be included in a candidate's or party's spending return?

Any campaign material which promotes the candidate or party, including face coverings, will count as candidate or party spending and will be required to be reported in their spending return.

The count

Will there be delays to the count?

As a result of the social distancing measures that will be in place in count venues, it is likely to take longer to count the votes this year than it has done in previous elections.

The counting of votes must begin as soon as practicable after the close of the poll. Each individual Returning Officer will make their own decision on when the counts will be held for their area, taking into account their own local circumstances. In Scotland and Wales, counts will begin on Friday 7 May.

A number of factors may affect how long it takes to complete the count, including the complexity of the polls, the number of different ballots to be counted, and the number of staff able to work in the count venue at the same time, particularly with social distancing measures in place. It is important that all votes are counted, and that the process is safe for those participating.

We have published [supplementary guidance for returning officers](#) on managing the verification and count process, which covers identifying suitable count venues and what to consider when making arrangements to ensure the safety of the count.

What safety measures will be in place at count venues?

Local Returning Officers are considering the measures needed to ensure the counting of the votes can take place safely, including providing hand sanitiser stations, adopting measures to encourage social distancing, and requiring those attending to wear face coverings. The Returning Officer may also use a different venue than usual, or use more than one venue, in order to make the event as safe as possible.

More information can be found in our [supplementary guidance for returning officers](#) on managing the count and verification process.

Who will be able to attend the count?

The rules for each election set out who is entitled to attend. For safety reasons, the local Returning Officer may limit the number of people who are permitted to attend the verification and count process.

Members of the media and photographers who want to attend or film at a count must contact the relevant local Returning Officer to request permission in advance to attend the count and declaration of the results.

Further information on the changes that Returning Officers are considering, and what candidates and agents can expect to see at the verification and count process can be found in our [supplementary guidance](#).

Public awareness

How is the Electoral Commission helping voters understand how to vote safely at the elections on Thursday 6 May 2021?

The Commission is carrying out a range of activity to ensure that voters understand the voting options available to them, as well as how their experience at polling stations may differ from normal, and the measures that will be in place to ensure they can vote safely.

As part of this, the Commission has provided a range of digital and print resources to help local authorities raise awareness of the upcoming elections, registration deadlines and voting options. These include social media images, posters, template press releases, and template messages for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable.

Voter information booklets are being sent to all households in Scotland and Wales. In Wales this bilingual booklet will provide information on the Senedd and Police and Crime Commissioner elections, and in Scotland will include information on the Scottish Parliament election. The booklets contain information on how to register, who is eligible to vote, how to vote and what people will be voting for. They will be issued from 22 March in Scotland and 5 April in Wales

How is the Commission supporting voters with disabilities?

The Commission has been working with organisations that represent people with disabilities. With them we are providing accessible information to help people understand how their experience at polling stations may differ from normal, and the measures that will be in place to ensure they can vote safely.

In addition, the Commission has developed polling station handbooks, designed to assist polling station staff. They contain specific guidance on how to make sure polling stations are set up so that the needs of voters with a range of disabilities can be considered.