

# Guidance note for County Returning Officers

## Purpose

County council elections take place every four years. In some county council areas the election may also be combined with other scheduled elections, such as parish elections, combined (county) authority mayoral elections or local authority mayoral elections, by-elections and/or local referendums

The purpose of this document is to assist you, as county Returning Officer (RO), by setting out some key considerations relating to the coordination and planning of the county council election in your area. Even if you have run county council elections before, you should be aware that there has been considerable change to legislation since the last scheduled polls which are outlined below:

## Voter identification at polling stations

- Voters must now bring [acceptable photographic identification](#) to vote in person at polling stations
- Voters who do not have photographic identification can apply for a [voter authority certificate \(VAC\)](#)
- Anonymous electors must produce an [anonymous elector's document](#) issued by the ERO in order to vote in person at a polling station

## Absent voting

### Postal vote applications:

- Voters can [apply online to vote by post](#)
- Postal vote applications are subject to [identification verification](#)

### Proxy vote applications:

- Voters can [apply online to vote by proxy](#) for a particular election, for all other proxy votes, a paper application is required
- Proxy vote applications (except for emergency proxy applications) are subject to identification verification
- There are limits on the number of people someone can be a proxy for. A person can act as a proxy for two people. If they vote on behalf of UK voters who live overseas, they can act as a proxy for up to four people (but only two of those can live in the UK)

## Postal vote handling

- ❑ When postal votes are handed in to the council office or at a polling station, the individual handing them in [must complete a form](#) or the postal vote will not be counted
- ❑ An individual can hand in their own postal vote as well as postal votes for up to five other people
- ❑ Political [campaigners cannot handle postal votes](#) on behalf of anyone who is not a close relative or someone for whom they provide regular care

## Accessibility

ROs must make reasonable adjustments and provide each polling station with such equipment as is reasonable for the purpose of enabling or making it easier for disabled voters to vote independently and in secret. For more information, see our guidance for [RO on providing assistance with voting for disabled electors](#).

## Intimidation and undue influence

There are new rules in respect of [undue influence](#) and threatening behaviour against a voter. The changes apply to all campaign activity, including printed materials, and extend to anyone who seeks to intimidate a voter either inside or outside a polling station.

## Your role as RO

As county RO, regardless of whether you have appointed Deputy Returning Officers (DROs) at each district council in your area to carry out functions on your behalf, you are still legally responsible for all aspects of the administration and conduct of the poll in your area. To effectively deliver the poll across the county you will need to cultivate positive working relationships with the DROs in your area. Unlike PAROs at PCC elections, you have no power of direction.

For more information on the role of the RO and appointment of DROs see our guidance on [Returning Officer's roles and responsibilities](#).

## Scale and complexity of the election

In deciding on how you will manage the county council election in your area, you will need to establish the scale of any combination of polls within your area. To do this you will need to work closely with the appointed DROs in your area to ensure you fully understand the context and challenges across the whole of the county council area. It will be important to agree planning assumptions at an early stage, recognising that these will need to be kept under review to respond appropriately should circumstances change.

Local knowledge and experience will be key and there is no 'one size fits all approach' which can be applied to, or even within, each county council area. Every county will have its own set of circumstances which will influence your decisions on

how best to ensure a consistent, high-quality experience for those voting and standing for election across the county.

## Providing leadership

As county RO, you are responsible for providing leadership and for coordinating the administration of all aspects of the election across the whole of the county. This will ensure that voters and those standing for election receive a consistently high quality of service regardless of where they live, the election is delivered safely and securely and that the election produces a result that is accepted.

Your project plan should set out the objectives and success measures as well as reflecting on your involvement in overseeing and coordinating the work of the districts. Any risks should be identified in your risk register and mitigating actions taken.

You should set out at an early stage what you want to achieve and what success would look like for you and as part of this you should consider how you will:

- ensure consistency of the poll across the whole county area, including understanding any particular challenges across your county area
- monitor the delivery of the poll across the county, including the conduct and delivery of work by your appointed deputies
- ensure you have a clear understanding of your statutory functions and a working knowledge of the legislation
- ensure that any guidance and instructions you issue are in accordance with legislation
- ensure you have appropriate insurance and indemnity cover in place

Your plans should:

Identify relevant lessons learnt from previous and/or similar electoral events – you will need to consider what worked well previously and what didn't work well and what can be done to mitigate against this.

Define your objectives and success measures. What will the successful delivery of the election look like for you?

## Key considerations

There will be aspects of the election process where you will particularly want to ensure that there is consistency, most notably in the areas that impact on the voters' experience, for example, the issue of poll cards and postal votes, the staffing of polling stations and the verification and counting of votes.

It is for you to decide how to best achieve the objectives set out in your project plan. You should base your decisions on factors such as your knowledge, experience, relationships with the DROs in your area, and taking into consideration issues of scope and scale of the election.

The following checklist sets out some key planning aspects for you to consider.

## Have you...?

### General planning

- Established a project team to support you in carrying out your functions?
- Adequate deputy arrangements in place? For example:
  - Have you appointed deputies in your immediate team, e.g. to take over your functions should you be unable to act?
  - Have you appointed deputies across the districts in your county? For example, for the adjudication of postal vote identifiers and doubtful ballot papers?
  - Is it clear in all cases which functions have been delegated?
- Established / agreed effective communications plans
  - to communicate with DROs?
  - to communicate with voters?
  - to communicate with candidates and agents?
  - to communicate with any media wishing to attend the count?
- Established a mechanism to be able to quality-assure the whole election process and ensure consistency across the county area?
- Developed an understanding of the scale and complexities of polls across the county council area?

For more information on specific planning considerations see our [guidance on planning for ROs](#).

### Specific election processes

- Agreed what role, if any, you will have in the management of actual processes, such as [nominations](#), [postal voting](#) and the [counting of votes](#)?
- Agreed the template for the [notice of election](#), as well as when it will be printed and published and where it will be displayed?
- Agreed the [print specification of ballot papers](#) and [proof-checking arrangements](#) by DROs?
- Agreed the [allocation of ballot papers to polling stations](#)?
- Agreed [polling station staffing levels](#)?
- Agreed what local information will be provided to candidates and agents?
- Agreed the [timing of poll card issues across the county area](#)? Electors should receive poll cards as soon as possible so they have the maximum amount of

time to act on the information, but you will need to factor in the complexity and scale of any combination of polls.

- Agreed the [timing of postal vote issues across the county area](#)? Electors should receive their postal vote as soon as possible so they have the maximum amount of time to complete and return it, but you will need to factor in the complexity and scale of any combination of polls.
- Agreed whether there will be [postal vote sweeps](#)?
- Agreed [verification and count times](#)?
- Agreed how [doubtful ballot papers](#) will be adjudicated?
- Agreed how the [results will be declared](#) and how they will be published?

### **Finance**

- Agreed appropriate funding mechanism and required audit arrangements?

### **Public awareness**

- Agreed how you will raise awareness of the election, registration and how to vote, having regard to any guidance issued by the Electoral Commission?

For more information on raising awareness on the voting process, see our [guidance on engaging with voters](#).

### **Venues and suppliers**

- Been reassured that suitable venues for all aspects of the poll have been identified and booked?
- Have you and DROs reviewed existing contracts with suppliers and contractors and are you reassured that they will be able to deliver those elements of the poll that you and the DROs have asked them to?

### **Integrity and security**

- Engaged with the SPOC and identified specific steps to deal with any potential electoral fraud or security risks to all those involved in the elections process?
- Considered specific risks at different key points in the process within each district of the county?
- Been reassured that risks relating to each district within the county are being adequately addressed locally?
- Agreed how you will deal with any problems that arise relating to the integrity or security of the poll?

- Agreed how you will communicate your approach to maintaining electoral integrity and security?

For more information on ensuring the election is free from fraud and everyone is able to participate safely and securely see our guidance on [maintaining the integrity and security of the election](#).

## Evaluation

- Agreed how will you evaluate your procedures post-election and identify lessons learnt?
- Agreed how you will involve ROs from the districts and learn lessons from their experiences?

For more information on post-election evaluations see our [after the election guidance](#).

# Guidance and support from the Electoral Commission

We set standards for elections and we use this framework to support Returning Officers in delivering well-run elections. We are working with all county ROs to help deliver the May 2025 polls and we will be in contact with you in due course, if we haven't contacted you already.

We have produced comprehensive RO guidance for the [forthcoming elections](#). The guidance is supplemented by resources which can be accessed through links contained throughout the guidance.

Likewise, there is a full suite of guidance and resources available for [candidates and agents](#).

Should you have any questions about our guidance or any other matter relating to the administration of the election 1 May 2025, we are available to provide on-going support via your [local Commission team](#). We will also be providing an out-of-hours advice service to deal with urgent electoral administration queries in the run up to and immediately following the election. Further information on the out-of-hours service will be provided through our [Bulletin for electoral administrators](#). We issue Bulletins on a regular basis. They are one of our key channels for communicating with Returning Officers, Electoral Registration Officers and their staff. You can [subscribe to receive our Bulletin here](#).

We will deliver public awareness campaigns on voter information, voter registration and the voter ID requirement ahead of the May 2025 polls using an integrated approach that combines paid advertising, press work, partnerships engagement, and digital outreach.

Crimestoppers will also run our voter fraud campaign, with funding from the Commission and the Cabinet Office.

We have created a [range of resources](#) which electoral administrators and council communications teams can use to support our campaign in your local area. These include social media assets, web banners, posters, and press releases.

We also publish a voter registration newsletter, [Roll Call](#), which aims to help local council communications teams stay up-to-date with the latest campaign information and resources. You and your council communications team, as well as DROs and their communications teams, can sign up to receive the newsletter [here](#).