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Guidance

The Government's approach to elections and referendums during COVID-19

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Applies to: England

This guidance applies to the current period of national lockdown and for changes to be implemented from 8 March.

Ministers have said that democracy should not be cancelled because of COVID-19. For this reason, May's elections will take place, and in a COVID-Secure way.

It is essential that campaigning be allowed in the run up to the polls on 6 May. An informed electorate is vital to ensure that voters can make a reasoned choice for whom to vote. The UK Government proposes to allow for two months of outdoor campaigning in the run up to May's polls, to support free and fair elections.

There must also be equality - a 'level-playing field' - for how people can campaign. This means avoiding having different rules within or between electoral areas as this would mean that electors could be treated differently in different areas, or even within an electoral area for polls such as for a Police & Crime Commissioner or in a Combined Authority area. We have therefore developed a clear and consistent approach to be applied across England for all campaigning.

Guidance will be published for campaigning in Wales and Scotland and the governments will work together to ensure the ability to operate across boundaries of the constituent nations in a practicable manner. It is essential that all those involved in campaigning follow the guidance for the relevant part of the UK they are campaigning in; in particular, it is important to be clear that Welsh laws and guidance will apply to those campaigning for the Police & Crime Commissioner elections in Wales (Police & Crime Commissioner elections take place in both England and Wales).

All those involved in the electoral process must also ensure that public health is protected. There is therefore a necessary balance to be struck in allowing campaigning activity and continuing to protect the NHS and save lives. It is essential that political campaigners continue to show social responsibility, and parties, agents and candidates ensure that their campaigners understand the rules.

The whole of England remains in a national lockdown (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-lockdown-stay-at-home>) (and will do until 29 March). You must follow the rules on what you can and cannot do. This means you must not leave, or be outside of your home except where you have a legally-permitted reason to do so. The Government's view is that current restrictions do not support door to door campaigning or leafleting by individual campaigners.

Voters can continue to get campaigning information remotely, for example through online campaign events and materials. Use of online and telephone campaigning remains the safest way to conduct campaigning for the polls on 6 May.

Leaving home to undertake leafleting increases the risk of unnecessary social interactions and viral transmission both during travel and on doorsteps. Campaigners should instead ensure leafleting is carried out through existing commercial delivery services.

All campaigners should follow the guidance on how to stop the spread of coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19>) at all times.

Campaigning safely from 8 March

The Government is committed to ensuring that the electorate can be as informed as possible about the choices that will be before them in these elections, and will therefore make changes to legislation to enable a substantial range of COVID-secure campaigning by candidates/campaigns and their supporters. The Government will change the lockdown regulations to support door to door campaigning activity.

This will ensure that campaigning can be undertaken during the regulated period and also for a period of time before the expenses requirements. It represents a proportionate approach which effectively balances the importance of effective elections with the need to protect public health.

This change to the restrictions is necessary to support the democratic process, but the need to maintain robust public health measures means that the relaxation applies only to people who are campaigning for the upcoming polls. This means that only those who are campaigning for a specific electoral outcome can carry out this activity. This can of course apply to anyone who has been asked by a candidate, party or campaign organiser to participate. Those in charge of campaigns will have to ensure that campaigners are aware of the guidance and of their responsibilities to follow the lockdown rules.

These provisions will be applicable from 8 March to ensure that all electors can be contacted and ensure there is equality of access to information so that electors are able to make informed choices about who and what they vote for. This will also ensure there is equality of opportunity for candidates to put forward their policies and arguments to their electorates.

All activity will still need to adhere to rules regarding social distancing and limits on gatherings. This will mean that activity will not be exactly the same as it has been in previous years, or as we want it to be in the future. But for this occasion, campaigning activity will be substantially effective and limited only by the degree necessary to meet the needs of health protection.

From 8 March, therefore, people who are campaigning in support of the electoral success (or against the electoral success) of candidates or political parties, or relating to a referendum outcome, will be allowed to deliver leaflets and canvass electors in relation to the elections and local referendums taking place on 6 May and for any further by-elections and local referendums being held for as long as COVID-19 related restrictions remain in place. The number of campaigners operating together should be kept to an absolute minimum and a minimum 2 metres distance should be maintained between them at all times.

Campaigners should not enter a private home. Campaigners may speak to electors on their doorsteps, maintaining at least 2 metres distance at all times.

Campaigners should only enter premises, such as a shared hallway in a block of flats, where absolutely necessary to reach individual homes served by communal areas. Unless it is unsafe to do so, canvassing from within shared internal areas should be carried out by a single campaigner.

At all times, campaigners should ensure that all necessary mitigations are applied including the wearing of face coverings, keeping socially distanced at 2 metres, and sanitising hands between visiting different households. All campaigners should follow the guidance on how to stop the spread of coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19>) at all times.

You should not meet with other campaigners indoors. It is safer to meet outdoors, where the risk of catching or spreading COVID-19 is much lower, but 2 metre social distancing should still be

maintained. Operational collection and delivery of campaign literature should be handled on a click and drop or doorstep drop procedure as for other goods deliveries during the pandemic. Only rarely will two people be required indoors at the same location to manage bulk delivery handling. You should keep these interactions to a minimum to reduce contact and follow the guidance on how to stop the spread of coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19>) at all times.

Meetings to organise and plan campaigns should be held online or over the phone. They should not take place in person. Where campaigners must attend in person, for example to collect printed materials, this should be organised on a one by one basis. Campaigners should keep two metres apart and follow the guidance on how to stop the spread of coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19>) at all times.

Hustings and public meetings must take place remotely.

Prior to any campaigning, participants should undertake a risk assessment. Political parties should provide guidance to party campaigners to support this. This is the advice of Public Health England. All campaigners should:

- ensure that they are well; if they have COVID-19 symptoms or have tested positive, they must stay at home (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>)
- make sure that they wash their hands more often and for 20 seconds, or use hand sanitiser regularly
- wear a face covering when meeting anybody they do not live with, whether electors or other campaigners
- maintain effective social distancing when talking to people, staying 2 metres apart at all times

Given two months of outdoor campaigning will be allowed, it is not necessary for doorstep campaigning by individual campaigners to take place prior to 8 March.

Campaigning safely from 29 March

From 29 March, the provision for six people or two households to meet outdoors may support organisational work by campaigners and the holding of meetings outdoors. At this stage, there will be no change to the rules on meeting others indoors. This means that the rules on doorstep campaigning will not change.

All campaigning activity will need to follow the relevant rules on gatherings and social distancing. If it is necessary to meet electors, campaigners should continue to do so outdoors, for example on the doorstep, and should not enter people's homes.

There is further guidance on how to stop the spread of coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19>). Campaigners should follow this guidance at all times.

Whilst campaigners may wish to have colleagues nearby as part of their campaigning, activity on any individual doorstep should be on a one to one basis. Campaigners should stay at least 2 metres apart

from each other as well as from the electors they are canvassing.

Related activity

Use of committee rooms

Use of committee rooms by parties and candidates on polling day has been a part of supporting campaigning activity for many years and has often had a social aspect. Any use of these rooms for the 6 May elections will need to be rigorously considered and, if used, undertaken in accordance with the prevailing guidance on gathering and hygiene and social distancing. Any such activity should be functional and not social. For example, a campaigner would only enter inside the building to meet the committee room organiser in order to collect election literature or drop off telling slips.

It is against the law to meet socially indoors with anyone not in your household or support bubble (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/making-a-support-bubble-with-another-household>).

Lifts to polling stations

You should not share a car with anyone from outside your household or your support bubble. You should follow the guidance on safer travel for passengers (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-travel-guidance-for-passengers>), which includes advice on private cars and other vehicles.

For elections, campaigners should not transport electors in private vehicles in order to access polling stations given the risk to public health. This means you should not offer lifts or facilitate car sharing. This is because car sharing has been identified as a particular risk of transmission.

Collection of postal votes from electors

Electors must be supported to vote in the way they wish, whether in-person at polling stations, by post or by appointing a proxy. There is an expectation that more people may choose to vote by post at these elections in order to minimise their need to have contact with others. That may particularly be the case for people who are or have been shielding or have underlying health conditions. New legislation will allow for an emergency proxy vote up to 5pm on polling day.

Where an elector does wish to vote by post the Government strongly encourages them to apply to do so (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apply-for-a-postal-vote>) as early as possible to ensure there is plenty of time for them to receive, complete and return their postal vote.

Campaigners should not collect postal ballots from electors for submission to the Returning Officer (known as 'vote harvesting'). It is the Government's intention to ban this practice altogether through legislation at the earliest opportunity.

Anyone that needs assistance with delivery of a postal vote to a post box ahead of polling day or to a polling station on polling day should be encouraged to ask a friend or neighbour to do this for them. You should ensure you stay 2 metres apart from anyone not in your household or support bubble.

Telling

If candidates and parties are stationing people outside polling places to act as 'tellers' to assist with

identifying who has and has not voted, they must follow the general rules of social distancing and other hygiene guidance as well as any specific requirements put in place by Returning Officers or their staff. This may involve tellers being required to remain within delineated areas outside of polling places. Using visual ground markers and/or signage may help remind tellers and the public to maintain distancing. Tellers should not enter the polling station (unless for the purpose of casting their own vote, where relevant).

Tellers should follow the guidance on how to stop the spread of coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19/how-to-stop-the-spread-of-coronavirus-covid-19>) at all times.

People going to vote can sometimes feel intimidated by tellers approaching them and that may be more evident at these polls because of a general concern about coming into close contact with others. Therefore tellers must be sensitive to this issue and must remain 2 metres apart from anyone not in their household or support bubble when seeking any information from people going into or coming out from a polling place.

The Government will update this guidance in due course as necessary.

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