

# Postal votes

The following sections provide guidance on postal voting and the processes involved.

The guidance covers:

- who can apply to vote by post
- what is contained in postal ballot pack
- the opening of postal votes and who can attend
- the postal vote opening process
- the appointment of postal voting agents and their role
- your duty to maintain secrecy during postal vote opening sessions, the [code of conduct for campaigners in Great Britain](#) and restrictions for campaigners around postal vote handling.

Last updated: 7 November 2024

## Who can apply to vote by post?

The following can apply to vote by post in local elections by submitting an application to their Electoral Registration Officer:

- A person aged 18 or over who is registered to vote
- A person aged 18 or over who or has applied to be registered to vote
- A person who has been appointed to vote as a proxy on behalf of someone else

The application must be received by the Electoral Registration Officer by 5pm, 11 working days before the poll. <sup>[1]</sup>

The Electoral Registration Officer has no discretion to extend the deadline for whatever reason.

1. Regulations 56(1), Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001

Last updated: 1 December 2023

## Postal ballot packs

Postal ballot packs will be sent to electors from around two weeks before polling day.

Electors who registered close to the registration deadline will be issued with their postal ballot packs once their names have been added to the final register update on the fifth working day before the poll. Electors who applied for their postal vote close to the application deadline will be issued with their postal ballot packs once their application has been determined.

Electors will then mark their ballot paper, complete the postal voting statement by providing their signature and date of birth, and return them to the Returning Officer before the close of poll (i.e. 10pm on polling day).

Last updated: 1 December 2023

# What does the postal ballot pack contain?

Postal ballot packs contain the following:

- Envelope A 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 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 Returning Officer
- The postal voting statement 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

If the election is combined with another poll, the Returning Officer may have decided to combine the issue of postal votes.

In that case, the postal ballot pack will also contain the ballot paper for the other electoral event(s).

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## The opening of postal votes

### Who can attend the opening of postal votes?

Candidates, election agents and postal voting agents are not entitled to attend the issue of postal votes.

The following people are entitled to attend the opening of returned postal votes:

- you
- your election agent or a person appointed by you to attend in their place. <sup>[1]</sup>
- agents you have appointed to attend openings on your behalf. <sup>[2]</sup>

For details on how to appoint these agents see our guidance on [appointing postal voting agents](#).

### Duty to maintain secrecy during postal vote opening sessions

Ballot papers will be kept face down throughout a postal vote opening session. <sup>[3]</sup> Anyone attending an opening session has a duty to maintain secrecy and must not:

- obtain
- attempt to obtain
- communicate at any time to another person
  - any information relating to the number or other unique identifying mark on the back of a ballot paper <sup>[4]</sup>
  - any information as to the official mark on a postal ballot paper before the close of poll <sup>[5]</sup>
- disclose how any particular ballot paper has been marked or pass on any such information gained from the session. <sup>[6]</sup>

It follows therefore that keeping a tally of how ballot papers have been marked is not allowed.

Anyone found guilty of breaching these requirements can face an unlimited fine or may be imprisoned for up to six months. <sup>[7]</sup>

1. Regulation 68, Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001 (RPR 2001)
2. Reg 69, RPR 2001
3. Reg 84(6), RPR 2001
4. s.66 (3A)(a), Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA 1983)
5. s.66 (3A)(b) and (4)(a), RPA 1983
6. s.66 (4)(b), RPA 1983
7. s.66 (6), RPA 1983

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# Appointing postal voting agents

You may appoint agents to attend postal vote openings.

Anyone can be appointed as a postal vote agent except for:

- the Returning Officer (RO) or a member of their staff [\[1\]](#)
- a partner or clerk of the RO or a member of their staff [\[2\]](#)
- anyone not entitled to vote at the election as a result of the report of an election court or a conviction for a corrupt or illegal practice under the Representation of the People Act 1983 [\[3\]](#)

A person may be appointed as a postal voting agent for more than one candidate. [\[4\]](#)

You and your election agent can automatically act as one of these agents without the need of an official appointment. [\[5\]](#)

The RO will tell you the maximum number of postal voting you can appoint. [\[6\]](#) All candidates will be allowed to appoint exactly the same number.

The request to appoint postal voting agents must be made in writing to the RO. [\[7\]](#)

The request must contain the names and addresses of the people being appointed. [\[8\]](#) The Returning Officer will provide forms you can use for this, or you can use the Commission' postal voting agent appointment form.

Appointment forms for postal voting agents need to be submitted to the RO by the time fixed for the opening of postal votes they want to attend. [\[9\]](#)

The RO will give you at least 48 hours' notice before the scheduled start of each postal vote opening session. [\[10\]](#)

If an agent dies or becomes incapable of acting, you may appoint another agent in their place by submitting the relevant appointment form to the RO. [\[11\]](#) Any new appointment in these circumstances must be made without delay.

More information on what postal voting agents can and cannot do and what they can expect to see at postal vote opening sessions can be found in our guidance on [what does a postal voting agent do](#) and [the stages of the postal vote opening process](#).

1. Section 99 Representation of the People Act 1983 (RPA 1983)
2. s.99 RPA 1983
3. s.165 RPA 1983
4. Schedule 2, Rule 27(2), Local Election (Principal Areas) (England and Wales) Rules 2006 (LEPAR 2006)
5. Schedule 2, Rule 27(9) and (10), LEPAR 2006, and Regs. 68 and 69(7), Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001 (RPR 2001)
6. Schedule 2 Rule 27(4), LEPAR 2006, and Reg. 69(1), RPR 2001
7. Schedule 2, Rule 27(5), LEPAR 2006, and Reg. 69(2), RPR 2001
8. Schedule 2, Rule 27(5), LEPAR 2006, and Reg. 69(2), RPR 2001
9. Reg. 69(2), RPR 2001
10. Reg. 80, RPR 2001
11. s.67(4), Representation of the People Act 1983

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## What does a postal voting agent do?

A postal voting agent is allowed to attend and observe postal vote opening sessions, which are run by the Returning Officer (RO).

At each opening session the RO will decide whether or not the date of birth and signature provided by electors on their postal voting statements match the signature and date of birth previously provided and held on their records. If there is a mismatch, the postal vote will be rejected.

A postal voting agent has a right to observe, but not to interfere with this process. A postal voting agent can, however, object to the decision of a RO to reject a postal vote. [\[1\]](#) It will not affect the RO's decision, but the RO will record any objections by marking the

postal voting statement with the words 'rejection objected to'.

Like your postal voting agents, you, your election agent and the person you may have appointed to attend on your election agent's behalf are also entitled to object to a rejection.

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

1. Reg. 85A (4), Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001

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## When are the postal votes opened and how will you know when an opening session is taking place?

It is likely that several opening sessions will take place before polling day, as well as on polling day itself.

The Returning Officer (RO) must:

- give candidates at least 48 hours' notice of when and where the sessions will take place. [\[1\]](#)
- set out how many postal voting agents will be allowed to attend each session.

There will be a final opening session after the polls have closed to open any postal votes handed in to polling stations. This session may be held at the count venue or in another location. The RO will advise you of the location for the final opening.

For more information on the process carried out at the opening of postal votes see our guidance on the [stages of the postal vote opening process](#).

1. Reg. 80, Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001

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## Stages of the postal vote opening process

The stages of the postal vote opening process can be summarised as follows:

Stage	Process
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

Stage	Process
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 Returning Officer (RO) must verify the dates of birth and signatures provided on the statements
10	The RO must be satisfied that the dates of birth and signatures on the statements match those previously 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 number 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 being delivered to the count venue for counting after the close of poll

## Matching up postal voting statements with postal ballot papers

The RO will keep lists of any provisionally rejected postal ballot papers <sup>[1]</sup> which are:

- any postal ballot paper that has been returned without a postal voting statement
- any postal voting statement that are not returned with the ballot paper

The RO will check these lists regularly to ensure that if any mismatched documents can be matched up, those postal ballots they are re-introduced into the process.

1. Reg. 87(2) and (3), Representation of the People (England and Wales) Regulations 2001

## Invalid and rejected postal voting statements

Valid ballot papers are those ballot papers whose related postal voting statement has passed the signature and date of birth checks.

A very small number of voters do not need to sign their postal voting statement. These 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. The postal voting statement sent to such electors will make this clear.

Invalid ballot papers are set aside and stored in secure packets.

Unless a waiver has been granted the Returning Officer (RO) will reject a postal voting statement if a signature and/or date of birth is missing, or if a signature and/or date of birth does not match that previously provided by the elector and held on record.

Rejected statements are attached to the relevant ballot paper or ballot paper envelope. They are marked as 'rejected' and shown to any agents present.

Agents can object to the RO's decision to reject any postal vote and, if they do, the words 'rejection objected to' are added to it. However, the RO's decision is final and the postal vote will remain rejected.

Other reasons for rejection include when an individual handing in a postal vote to the Returning Officer:

- does not fully complete the postal vote return form (incomplete)
- hands in postal votes on behalf of more than the permitted number of electors
- is a campaigner not permitted to handle postal votes
- does not complete the postal vote return form (left behind)

In these cases the postal vote will be rejected. You may see these rejected postal votes sealed up with a description of its contents written on each packet.