



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

Absent Vote Changes & Online Absent Voting Applications (OAVA)

Postal and Proxy Voting

February 2024



Background

Issues with previous Absent Voting requirements

- Risk of coercion for postal votes
 - o long signature refresh cycle could cause coerced postal voters to go unnoticed
- Irrational limits for proxies (limits based on 'electoral area')

Issues with previous Absent Vote application process

- Paper-only applications created burden for Electors and EROs
- Lack of ID check involved a risk of fraud



Changes to Absent Voting

Postal Voting

Postal voters were previously required to provide a fresh signature every 5 years. This has changed so postal voters must to apply again every 3 years.

Proxy Voting

An individual can now only act as a proxy for up to 4 people. Of these, the maximum number who can be 'domestic electors' (voters living in the UK) is 2.

Submission of scanned paper applications

An absent vote application must still include date of birth and signature, but scanned applications can now also be accepted by email as long as the signature section has been completed by hand.

Identity Checking

An absent vote application must now include a National Insurance Number (NINo). If an applicant has no NINo, an ERO may request other specified evidence, or an attestation.



Online Absent Vote Applications (OAVA)

- Allows electors to go online to apply for an absent vote in certain circumstances.

Available in the OAVA service

- Postal vote
- Proxy for a particular poll
- Proxy for a definite or indefinite period for:
 - Overseas electors,
 - Armed forces voters,
 - Crown Servants,
 - British Council employees

Not available in the OAVA service

- Postal proxy vote
- Proxy for a definite or indefinite period for: disability, employment/occupation/service
- Emergency proxy
- Postal and proxy applications by anonymous electors
- Signature refresh
- Signature waivers (partial journey is enabled)*

*Applicants may indicate they cannot give a signature and complete the rest of their application online



OAVA availability across Great Britain

- DLUHC is working with the Scottish and Welsh Governments to extend the OAVA service to devolved elections in Scotland and Wales.
- We are aiming to deliver this in time for their devolved parliamentary elections in May 2026.

	England	Scotland	Wales
UK Parliamentary Election	Yes	Yes	Yes
Local Government	Yes	No	No
Scottish Parliament	N/A	No	N/A
Welsh Parliament	N/A	N/A	No
Mayoral (local, London, London Assembly)	Yes	No	No
Police & Crime Commissioner	Yes	N/A	Yes
National Referendums	Yes	Yes	Yes
Local Referendums	Yes	No	No
Recall election / petition	Yes	Yes	Yes

Absent voting applications

Code of conduct

Campaigners should be free to encourage voters to apply for an absent vote if that is the most convenient way for them to vote.

You should encourage voters in the first instance to use the online application services (where available), or you can provide voters with paper application forms. Electoral Registration Officers must support you by providing you with a reasonable number absent vote application forms on request.

Absent vote forms should conform to electoral law

Campaigners should ensure that any alternative design of paper absent voting application forms meet the requirements of electoral law.

ERO's address should be preferred return address

Campaigners should ensure that the local Electoral Registration Officer's address is clearly provided as the preferred return address.

Campaigners should send completed forms unaltered to ERO within two working days of receipt

This is to minimise the risk of absent vote applications being refused because completed forms arrive with the Electoral Registration Officer after the statutory deadline before a poll.

Code of conduct cont.

Implications of applying to vote by post or proxy

Campaigners should explain the implications of applying for an absent vote. It is important that electors understand they will be unable to vote in person on polling day if they or their proxy apply for and are granted a postal vote and will not be able to vote in person if their appointed proxy has already voted on their behalf.

To avoid duplication and unnecessary administrative pressures for Electoral Registration Officers campaigners should try to ensure that electors with existing absent voting arrangements, or who have already applied for an absent vote for a particular poll, do not submit an additional duplicate application.



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Secrecy of the Ballot & Postal Vote Handling Changes

Postal and Proxy Voting

February 2024



Postal Vote Handling and Secrecy Background

- In 2016, Sir Eric (now Lord) Pickles published a report into electoral fraud entitled *Securing the Ballot*. The report made a number of recommendations designed to address electoral fraud and to strengthen the integrity and security of voting, including postal voting.
- The Pickles report highlighted concerns at past elections with political campaigners collecting or "harvesting" postal votes issued to other voters and noted that this was not prohibited under electoral law. This left scope for the integrity of postal voting to be undermined and the perception that postal voting was open to fraud.
- The Pickles report noted secrecy of the ballot as fundamental for voters to be able to cast their vote without pressure to vote in a specific way and recommended that the secrecy provision previously limited to voting within polling stations should be extended to absent voting.



Postal Vote Handling and Secrecy

Who can handle Postal Votes

- Political campaigners banned from handling postal voting documents issued to another person (with exception for close family members and people the campaigner is caring for)
- So cannot hand in to polling stations / deliver to the Returning Officer or agents.
- Other persons will be able to hand in their own postal vote and those for up to 5 other persons.



Postal Vote Handling and Secrecy

New rules on handing in Postal Votes

- When handing in postal votes, you will need to complete a form and provide specified information, including name and address and the reason for handing in other persons' postal votes, where applicable.
- The votes and form will need to be handed to someone authorised by the RO, who also needs to complete part of the form.
- Votes that are not handed in accordance with the new requirements will be rejected.
- EROs will need to contact electors after the poll if their postal votes were rejected for not being handed in in accordance with new rules.



New rules on Secrecy

New rules on Secrecy

- We are also extending secrecy provisions that apply to voting in polling stations to postal and proxy voting.

Postal Voting

- It will be an offence for a person to obtain or to attempt to obtain information about how a postal voter has voted whilst they are completing their ballot paper.
- It will also be an offence for a person to communicate such information to someone else.
- There is an exemption for opinion pollsters so they are not criminalised if they ask a postal voter how they have voted or intend to vote.

Proxy Voting

- It will be an offence for a person voting as proxy for another elector to communicate to anyone, except the elector for whom they are voting as proxy, any information as to the candidate for whom that person is about to vote or has voted (as proxy).

Postal vote handling and secrecy

Postal vote handling

The restrictions **How many postal votes can I hand in?**

You may hand in your own postal vote and those of up to 5 other electors per poll.

If there are multiple polls taking place, and postal votes for these polls have been issued separately, the postal votes handed in must still only belong to a total of 5 other electors, however there may be multiple postal votes per elector.

If you are acting as a proxy postal voter, the total number of other electors for whom you can hand in postal votes is reduced by the number of proxy postal votes you are handing in. For example, if you hand in 2 proxy postal votes, you can hand in postal votes for up to 3 other electors.

If you hand in, or are suspected of handing in, postal votes on behalf of more electors than permitted, for a single poll, all other postal votes received will be rejected except your own.

Handling of postal votes by political campaigners

Section 112A of the Representation of the People Act 1983 and paragraph 9A of Schedule 2 of the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections Order 2012, make it an offence for a political campaigner at an election to handle the postal vote(s) of another person, unless that person is a close relative or someone for whom they or the organisation which employs or engages them provide regular care.

Definitions

Political Campaigner –
set out on reverse of
the postal vote return
form

- a candidate at the election;
- an election agent of a candidate at the election;
- a sub-agent of an election agent at the election;
- employed or engaged by a person who is a candidate at the election for the purposes of that person's activities as a candidate;
- a member of a registered political party who carries out an activity designed to promote a particular outcome at the election;
- employed or engaged by a registered political party in connection with the party's political activities;
- employed or engaged by a person listed in (a) to (f) above, to carry out an activity designed to promote a particular outcome at the election;
- employed or engaged by a person within paragraph (g) to carry out an activity designed to promote a particular outcome at the election

Close relatives and regular care

Close relatives

Close relatives are an individual's spouse, civil partner, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild. Two people living together as if they were a married couple or civil partners are treated as such.

Regular care

If the individual confirms that they are a political campaigner, they are only allowed to hand in their own postal vote and up to five others that either belong to a close relative, or to someone for whom they, or the organisation which employs or engages them, provides regular care.

Where can postal votes be handed in?

Council offices

- RO will advise where postal votes can be handed in.
- RO staff will assist with the completion of the postal vote return form
- Postal vote return form must be completed
- Any postal votes handed in/left without a form will be rejected

The Polling Station

- Postal votes can be returned to any polling station in the electoral area.
- Polling station staff will assist with the completion of the postal vote return form
- Postal vote return form must be completed
- Any postal votes handed in/left without a form will be rejected

The process when handing in a postal vote

Completion of postal vote return form

Section 1:

- Records details about how many postal votes are being handed in, and if the individual is a campaigner. If the individual:

Section 2:

- Individual completes with their name, their address and (if applicable) the reason for handing in postal votes for other people
- Individual completes the declaration confirming that:
 - they have not handed in more than the permitted number of postal votes
 - they are not a political campaigner, or
 - they are a political campaigner and have only handed in their own postal vote and/or that of a close relative, or someone for whom they provide regular care

Section 3:

- RO staff/polling station staff check the details provided and either:
 - Accept the postal vote votes
 - (Reject the postal votes if necessary)

When will postal votes be rejected?

Reasons for rejecting postal votes delivered by hand

There are four situations where a postal vote that is handed in will be rejected

The individual:

- did not fully complete the postal vote return form
- handed in postal votes on behalf of more than the permitted number of electors
- is a campaigner not permitted to handle the postal votes
- did not complete the postal vote return form