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Summary

This guide answers key questions on the upcoming Northern Ireland Local Council Elections

Use the content box to jump to different sections on candidates, spending and donations, and the voting process. Click the drop-down questions to see answers.

Local council elections overview

When are the elections taking place?

On 18 May 2023, voters in Northern Ireland will elect 462 councillors across 11 local councils.

Election timetable

Event Date and deadline (if not midnight)

Publication of notice of election

Not later than 11 April

Regulated period for campaign spending by candidates begins

The day after they officially become a candidate

No earlier than 12 April

Delivery of nomination papers

From the date state on the notice of election up to 1pm on 24 April

Deadline for withdrawals of nomination

1pm on 24 April

Publication of statement of persons nominated

6pm on 24 April (if no objections)

Deadline for applications to vote by post or proxy

5pm on 26 April

Deadline to apply to register to vote

11.59pm on 28 April

Deadline to apply for Electoral ID card

5 May

Polling day

7am-10pm on 18 May

Election count

19 May

count starts

Last day for submission of candidate spending returns

Within 35 days of results being announced

How are the seats spread out?

Name of council

Number of councillors to be elected

Antrim and Newtownabbey 40

Ards and North Down 40

Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon 41

Belfast 60

Causeway Coast and Glens 40

Derry and Strabane 40

Fermanagh and Omagh 40

Lisburn and Castlereagh 40

Mid and East Antrim 40

Mid Ulster 40

Newry, Mourne and Down 41

Candidates

Who can become a candidate?

Anyone that wants to become a candidate in the local elections on 18 May 2023 must be: at least 18 years old on the day of the candidate's nomination

a British, Irish or qualifying Commonwealth citizen, or a citizen of a European Union country not be disqualified from being a councillor

They must also meet at least one of the following three qualifications:

be a local elector for the district of the Council in which they are standing on both the day they are nominated and on polling day

have occupied as owner or tenant land in that district or have resided in that district during the whole of the period of twelve months immediately preceding the day of the poll

their principal or only place of work during that twelve months has been in that district

What does someone have to do to stand as a candidate?

All prospective candidates must submit the following to the relevant council office by 1pm on 24 April 2023:

completed nomination papers

home address form

and consent to nomination form

To stand on behalf of a registered political party, the party must be registered on the Electoral Commission's register of Northern Ireland political parties.

The deadline has passed to register a political party or amend the details of an existing party for the upcoming council elections.

Candidates standing on behalf of a party will need to get their permission and also need to submit:

a signed certificate of authorisation from the party that allows them to use the party name, description and emblem on the ballot paper

a request to use the party description/emblem

written request to use one of the party's registered emblems (optional)

Candidates not standing on behalf of a party may use the description 'Independent' or no description at all and cannot use an emblem.

In addition, local election candidates require the signatures of 10 registered electors from their respective district electoral area.

Further guidance for candidates and agents on standing for election is available from The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI).

What are the disqualification

rules? The rules around standing for election and the disqualifications that apply are complex. The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland has produced guidance for candidates and agents which contains information on what disqualifies someone from standing to be a candidate in May's elections. If someone wishes to stand as a candidate and has concerns about qualification, we recommend they seek independent legal advice. When does someone become a candidate? The earliest that a person can officially become a candidate is the day after publication of notice of election, which is no later than 11 April 2023. If they declare after 12 April 2023 that they will be a candidate they become a candidate on that day, or the date they formally submit their nomination papers – whichever is earliest. When will we know who all the candidates are? The deadline for prospective candidates to submit nomination papers is 1pm on 24 April 2023. If there are no objections, each Deputy Returning Officer will publish a statement of persons nominated no later than 6pm on 24 April 2023 (or as soon as practicable thereafter). This will usually be available on the respective local council websites. Once this has been published, you will be able to see the full list of candidates for each council. Can someone stand for election in more than one District Electoral Area (DEA) within the same council area? Anyone who wants to stand as a candidate can submit nomination papers for more than one DEA, but they cannot stand for election in more than one DEA within the same local authority after the deadline of withdrawals. Campaigning at the election When can candidates start campaigning? Candidates can start campaigning at any time. They do not have to wait until they are validly nominated to declare that they will run for election, ask people to support them or publish campaign material. Election spending limits apply from the day after a person officially becomes a candidate. What can candidates say about one another during the campaign? It is illegal to make a false statement about the personal character of a candidate in order to influence the result of the elections. Rules about defamation also apply to election materials. The police may investigate allegations of the electoral offence of making a false statement. Defamation issues are a matter for the civil courts. The Electoral Commission does not have a regulatory role in relation to the content of campaign material or what candidates say about each other. However, we do encourage all campaigners to undertake their vital role responsibly and to support campaign transparency. What are the rules on impartiality for the media? It is not required that news reports, features and editorials in print or online are impartial. They are not subject to electoral law. Political impartiality in broadcast media is covered by the editorial guidelines for each broadcaster. TV, radio, and online debates are a matter for the relevant broadcaster or newspaper. The Electoral Commission has no regulatory role relating to these debates. What are the rules regarding campaign materials? By law, candidates, parties, and non-party campaigners must use imprints on all their printed campaign materials. An imprint includes the name and address of the printer and promoter (the person who authorised the material to be printed). It must be included on all printed material such as posters, placards, and leaflets. This is so that voters can be clear about the source of the campaign material. It is an offence not to include an imprint on printed election material. For more information on imprints rules, please see our guidance for: Imprints on candidate material Imprints on party material Imprints on non-party material What are the electoral rules regarding digital campaign materials? While it is not currently a legal requirement, the Electoral Commission recommends that candidates, parties and non-party campaigners wherever possible, place an imprint on their digital materials (e.g. websites, emails and social media platforms). Voters need to know who is targeting them with political

messages online. The UK Government's Elections Act 2022 introduces an imprint requirement for digital political material, which will apply year-round. It is due to come into effect in November 2023. Can candidates see the electoral register? Once someone becomes a candidate, they are entitled to receive, free of charge, a copy of the electoral register and the lists of people voting by post or proxy (the absent voters list) for the District Electoral Area that they are contesting. Candidates may only use the electoral register to help them complete their nomination form, to campaign and to check that donations they receive come from a permissible source. Candidates must not release any details that appear in the electoral register (this is different from information on the open register, which is available for general sale).

**Spending and donation rules** What is the regulated period for the May 2023 local council elections? The regulated period is the period in the run up to an election during which electoral spending rules apply to campaigning. The regulated period for these elections begins the day after someone officially becomes a candidate and ends on polling day, 18 May. The earliest someone can officially become a candidate is on 11 April. There is no regulated period for party spending during this time unless the spend is specifically on a candidate's campaign, at which point it counts towards a candidate's limit. What is the spending limit? For local government election candidates, the spending limit is calculated using a base figure of £600, plus 5p per local government elector in the district electoral area where the candidate is standing. Joint candidates have lower spending limits, as they are sharing some of the costs. A joint candidate is someone standing in the same district electoral area who has the same election agent or uses the same campaign rooms or publishes joint material with another candidate. In a district electoral area with two joint candidates, each candidate calculates their spending limit using the formula above and reducing it by 25%. If there are three or more joint candidates each candidate's spending limit is reduced by 33%. More information on this is available in our guidance on candidate spending and donations at the local government elections . To assist candidates and agents in calculating their spending limit for the election, the Deputy Returning Officer will be able to provide candidates with the number of electors in the relevant district electoral area. This information will also be published on EONI's website. What activities count towards the spending limit? Candidate spending includes the costs of: advertising of any kind, such as posters, newspaper adverts, websites or YouTube videos unsolicited material sent to voters, such as letters, leaflets or emails that are not sent in response to specific queries transport costs, such as hire cars or public transport for the candidate's campaigner public meetings staff costs (e.g. an agent's salary, or staff seconded to a candidate) accommodation (e.g. a campaign office) administrative costs (e.g. telephone bills, stationery, photocopying and the use of databases) Activities that do not count include: a candidate's Freepost entitlement (the cost of producing the material being posted DOES count towards the spending limit) anything (except adverts) appearing in a newspaper or on a licensed broadcast channel costs that are reasonably attributable to the candidate's disability volunteer time including time spent by your staff that you do not pay them for use of someone's main residence, provided free of charge use of someone's personal car or other means of transport acquired principally for that person's personal use and provided free of charge general computer equipment bought for the candidate's personal use and provided free of charge

**What counts as a donation?** A donation is money, goods, property, or services that are given to a candidate, without charge or on non-commercial terms, which has a value of over £50. Anything with a value of £50 or less does not count as

a donation. Who can make donations to candidates? Anyone can make a donation worth £50 or less to candidates. Candidates are not required to declare details of donations with a value of £50 or less in their spending and donations return. Candidates must ensure that any donation worth more than £50 is only accepted if it is from a permissible source. This applies to cash donations and donations in kind. Donations that are not from a permissible source must be returned to the donor within 30 days. After that, the donation may be forfeited. Permissible donors for candidates at the local elections are defined as: an individual on a UK electoral register a GB registered political party a UK registered trade union a UK registered building society a UK registered limited liability partnership a UK registered friendly society a UK based unincorporated association Can political parties fund their candidates? Many political parties run a local 'fighting fund' for their candidate. If the fund is managed and controlled by the party and not the candidate, then donations to the fund are usually treated as having been made to the party. However, during the regulated period, any donations above £50 made by the party to a candidate must be reported in the candidate's spending return. What are the rules on crowdfunding? Candidates can use crowdfunding websites to raise donations for their campaign. The candidate must know who the money comes from so that they can carry out the permissibility checks, and ensure that there are measures in place to return donations that are from impermissible sources. How do candidates report their regulated spending and donations? Candidates at the local elections must submit their campaign spending returns to their local Deputy Returning Officer within 35 days of the election result being declared. If no spending is incurred, a nil return must be submitted by the candidate (or their agent). What happens if a candidate exceeds their spending limit? Exceeding the spending limit can be a criminal offence. Allegations relating to candidate spending offences are generally made to the relevant local police force to consider. Whilst the Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to monitor compliance with laws relating to candidate and agent expenses, it is not legally empowered to investigate and impose sanctions for these offences. What are the rules for non-party campaigners? Non-party campaigners are individuals and organisations that campaign in the run up to elections but do not stand as political parties or candidates. Under local campaigning rules, where a non-party campaigner campaigns for or against a candidate in a district electoral area, certain rules apply to spending on this activity within the regulated period. You can find more information on page 31 of our spending and donations guidance . Registering to vote Who can vote in the 18 May elections? A person can vote in the local council elections if they are: included on the electoral register at least 18 years of age on the day of election a British, Irish or qualifying Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the European Union What is the registration deadline? The deadline to apply to register is 11:59pm on 28 April 2023. How does someone register to vote? People can register to vote online at [gov.uk/register-to-vote](https://gov.uk/register-to-vote) . If people are unable to register online, they can still complete a paper registration form and return it to the Electoral Office. The form can be downloaded from [eoni.org.uk](https://eoni.org.uk) or they can contact the Electoral Office on 028 9044 6680 and they will post a form to them. Can someone register at two different addresses? In some cases you may be eligible to register to vote at two different addresses, for example, if you own two homes or if you are a student living away from home. If an individual thinks they meet the requirements for registration at two separate addresses they can contact EONI for more information. If an individual is registered to vote in two different electoral areas then at May's local elections, they are legally entitled to vote in both of those electoral areas.

However, it is an offence to vote twice in the same electoral area. Can prisoners vote? Remand prisoners (those who have not been convicted and sentenced) can vote. Convicted prisoners detained because of their sentence cannot. In some limited circumstances, prisoners released on temporary licence may meet the criteria to register to vote. What is the Electoral Commission doing to encourage people to register to vote? The Commission's campaign for Northern Ireland launches on 20 March and runs until the registration deadline of 28 April. Campaign advertising will be spread across TV, radio, video-on-demand, outdoor and social channels. It will also be supported by dedicated organic PR and social activity covering both registration and wider voter information. Additionally, the Commission is providing resources for partner organisations to use as part of their public engagement work on key voter registration and information messages. The Commission will be running an additional campaign from 27 March to 24 April to raise awareness of Digital Registration Numbers (DRNs). A person applying to vote by post or proxy will need to provide their DRN if they registered to vote online. Almost 4,000 applications were rejected ahead of the 2022 Assembly Elections due to a missing or incorrect DRN. The campaign will run across both digital and print media.

**Voting in person**

What should voters know ahead of polling day

Polling stations will be open between 7am and 10pm on Thursday 18 May. Voters should arrive in plenty of time to avoid missing out on having their say. Any voter who is in a queue at the polling station waiting to vote at 10pm will be able to vote. Voters will need to bring an accepted form of ID in order to vote. Before polling day, voters will be sent a poll card, which includes details of where their polling station is. Voters can only vote at the polling station specified on this card. Polling station staff will be on hand to explain the ballot paper(s) and how to vote. The law relating to obtaining information in polling stations and disclosing such information is complex, but we advise against taking selfies or other photos in the polling station, given the risks that this may be in breach of the law.

**What ID is acceptable to vote in the council elections?**

Voters must present photographic identification at their polling station to confirm their identity. Voters must present one of the following to poll staff before they can be issued with a ballot paper: a UK, Irish or EU passport a photographic Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Irish or EEA driving licence a Translink Senior Smartpass a Translink 60+ Smartpass a Translink War Disabled Smartpass a Translink Blind Person's Smartpass an Electoral Identity Card a Half Fare SmartPass (travel pass) a biometric immigration document

The identification does not need to be 'current' but the presiding officer must be satisfied that the photograph matches that of the person intending to vote. If voters do not have one of the other accepted forms of photo ID, they can apply for an Electoral Identity Card. You must be on the electoral register to get a card. You can apply for an Electoral Identity Card in person or by post. The deadline to apply for an Electoral Identity Card is 5 May.

**How do voters complete their ballot paper for the local government elections?**

The electoral system used to elect councilors in Northern Ireland is the Single Transferable Vote (STV). Voters cast their votes by putting a number '1' next to the name of their favourite candidate, a '2' next to their second favourite candidate and so on. Voters can vote for as many or as few candidates as they like.

**What provisions are made to make voting more accessible to voters with disabilities?**

The Commission provides guidance to polling station staff, to help them make sure that polling stations are accessible to everyone. Changes introduced in the Elections Act permit disabled voters to choose anyone who is over 18 to accompany them in the polling station to help them vote. The Act also changes the assistance available at polling stations. We consulted charities and electoral

administrators, before updating our accessibility guidance for administrators, to make sure that disabled voters can access the service they are entitled to in polling stations. Our guidance aims to support Returning Officers to understand and identify the barriers to voting faced by disabled voters. It sets out the equipment that should be made available as a minimum at the polling station, and what other equipment or support may also be helpful to provide. This should include measures such as a tactile voting device, polling booth at wheelchair level, magnifiers and pencil grips. Returning Officers must have regard to this guidance. Voting by post or proxy How can you register to vote by post or proxy? Voters who are unable to go to the polling station on polling day can apply to vote by post or proxy. They must complete a postal or proxy vote application form specifying the reason why they are applying. The deadline to apply to vote by post or proxy is 5pm on 26 April. Voter who registered to vote online will have been given a Digital Registration Number (DRN). They will need to provide their DRN on their application to vote by post or proxy. They can request their DRN by completing an online form on the Electoral office for Northern Ireland's website or they can call their helpline on 028 9044 6680. What is a Digital Registration Number? The Digital Registration Number (DRN) is a unique number issued to voters by the Electoral Office once they successfully register online. The DRN is used to check the identity of postal or proxy vote applicants. It is important that voters who registered online keep hold of this number as it is necessary for applying for a postal or by proxy vote. Is it ok for someone to take a picture of their postal ballot and post it on social media showing how they have voted? Postal ballot papers are treated differently in electoral law, compared to polling station ballot papers. A postal voter may take a picture of their own postal ballot paper and publicise it (including via social media). However, while the postal voter themselves may publicise the information, if someone else persuades or induces them to make this information available, they would be committing an offence. If there are any suggestions or allegations that this could be happening, the person making the complaint should be advised to report the matter to the police. What safeguards are in place to ensure postal voting is secure? Postal voting is not available on demand in Northern Ireland. When making an application a person must give a valid reason for their application along with their date of birth, national insurance number, signature, and Digital Registration Number (if they registered online). When casting their postal vote, they are asked again for their signature and date of birth. Both records are compared and if the Returning Officer is not satisfied that they match, the ballot paper is not counted. Can political parties handle postal votes? The Electoral Commission has developed a Code of Conduct for campaigners, which applies to all political parties, candidates and their supporters. The Code includes the following guidance for parties, candidates and campaigners. Do not assist in completing a ballot paper - instead, campaigners should always refer the voter to the Returning Officer's team who may be able to arrange a home visit or provide assistance at the polling station. Do not handle or take any completed ballot papers from voters. Instead, voters should be encouraged to post their postal ballot pack themselves - alternatively, the Returning Officer's team may be able to arrange for it to be collected. Provisions in the Elections Act will ban parties and campaigners from handling completed postal votes and postal vote envelopes These changes are expected to come into force in autumn 2023 ahead of the May 2024 elections. We encourage campaigners to follow the Code of Conduct. The count and declaration of results Who is responsible for the count? The relevant Deputy Returning Officer will have overall responsibility for the counting of the votes at

their respective election under the direction of the Chief Electoral Office for Northern Ireland. The relevant council will be able to provide projected count times.

Where are the counts taking place? Council Count venue Antrim and Newtownabbey Valley Leisure Centre, Newtownabbey Ards and North Down Aurora Aquatic and Leisure Complex, Bangor Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Banbridge Leisure Centre Belfast Belfast City Hall Causeway Coast and Glens Coleraine Leisure Centre Derry and Strabane Foyle Arena Fermanagh and Omagh Omagh Leisure Complex Lisburn and Castlereagh Lagan Valley Leisureplex, Lisburn Mid and East Antrim Seven Towers Leisure Centre, Ballymena Mid Ulster Meadowbank Sports Arena, Magherafelt Newry, Mourne and Down Newry Leisure Centre

How can media attend a count? Members of the media who wish to attend a count venue should contact the Deputy Returning Officer for the relevant council. A list of count venues and contact details can be found in the media centre on the Electoral Office website.

How are the votes counted? There are four stages to the count process. The postal ballot boxes and ballot boxes from the polling stations arrive at the count venue. Staff carry out a verification process and ensure that the number of postal ballot papers and ballot papers matches the numbers recorded by the relevant Returning Officer, and by the Presiding Officer at the polling station respectively. The votes are counted and the results are declared by the Returning Officer. The Returning Officer will announce the name of the candidate(s) with the most votes as duly elected.

Can the result be challenged after it has been announced? Someone can challenge the result of an election by issuing an election petition. This is a legal action and will be adjudicated by a judge in court. A petition can be presented by: someone who voted or had the right to vote at the election a candidate at the election someone claiming to have had the right to be elected at the election

A petition at a local government election must normally be presented within 21 calendar days after the day on which the election was held. Further time may be allowed in certain circumstances. Petitioners must sign the petition and return it to the Clerk of the Crown at the Royal Courts of Justice in Belfast.

Electoral fraud What is electoral fraud? The Representation of the People Act 1983 specifies a number of criminal offences relating to electoral fraud. Offences include:

- Personation: This is where an individual votes as someone else (whether that person is living, dead or fictitious), either by post or at a polling station, in person or as a proxy.
- Undue influence / intimidation – A person is guilty of undue influence if they attempt to influence someone's vote by: using or threatening force, violence or restraint inflicting or threatening injury, damage, loss or harm impeding or preventing someone from freely exercising their right to vote – even where the attempt is unsuccessful
- Bribery: A person is guilty of bribery if they directly or indirectly offer any reward (whether financial or otherwise) in order to induce any voter to vote or refrain from voting.
- Treating: A person is guilty of treating if either before, during, or after an election they directly or indirectly give or provide any food, drink, entertainment or provision to corruptly influence any voter to vote or refrain from voting. Treating requires a corrupt intent - it does not apply to ordinary hospitality.
- False statements: It is an offence to make or publish a false statement of fact about the personal character or conduct of a candidate in order to affect the return of a candidate at an election. False statements that are not about a candidate's personal character or conduct are not illegal under electoral law, but could be considered as libel or slander. It is an offence to knowingly provide a false statement on a nomination paper.

Multiple voting and proxy voting offences: There are various offences regarding multiple voting and proxy voting, including voting (whether in person, by post or by proxy) when subject to a legal incapacity to

vote and voting more than once in the same election. False information in connection with registration and absent voting: It is an offence to supply false registration information to an Electoral Registration Officer. It is also an offence to supply false information in connection with an application for a postal or proxy vote. Who is responsible tackling electoral fraud? PSNI is responsible for investigating any allegations that an offence may have taken place. The Chief Electoral Officer works closely with PSNI to prevent and detect electoral fraud. Deputy Returning Officers will also work closely with police in their local area to identify any concerns relating to the safety of the polls. Anyone, including candidates, politicians, and members of the public, who has evidence of electoral fraud taking place should report it to the police immediately, using the 101 non-emergency number, unless there is a crime in progress. People can also choose to contact Crimestoppers anonymously on 0800 555 111.

### Roles and responsibilities

#### The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland

The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI) is the collective name for staff who assist the Chief Electoral Officer in delivery of their statutory duties. The Chief Electoral Officer is both the Returning Officer (RO) and Electoral Registration Officer for all elections in Northern Ireland. The Chief Electoral officer administers elections and compiles the register of electors in Northern Ireland. They have responsibility for the organisation and conduct of the election – including nominations, distribution of poll cards and postal ballots, the conduct of the poll and the counting of votes.

#### Deputy Returning Officers (DROs)

Local Council Chief Executives are appointed as Deputy Returning Officers (DROs) at local council elections. The DROs act with the authority of the Returning Officer. Their responsibilities include: receiving candidate nominations publishing the statement of persons nominated and notice of poll printing ballot papers and corresponding number lists preparing ballot boxes managing the verification and count of ballot papers receiving returns and declarations of election expenses

#### The Electoral Commission

Our role in these elections is to: produce guidance for candidates standing for election, their agents, parties and non-party campaigners on campaigning at the election register political parties and non-party campaigners raise public awareness of the elections and how to take part in them report on the conduct of the elections

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