

A Guide to Voting during a General Election

We want to make sure you have all the information you need to cast your vote during a general election.

People living with severe mental illness and their loved ones often face a number of challenges when it comes to voting and do not get the information and support they need to carry out their democratic right to vote.



We want to make sure that everyone who wants to vote at the next election is able to do so - that's why we've created this guide to support you through the process.

Eligibility

Who can register to vote?

You can register to vote if you are 18 years old or over, and:

- a UK or Irish citizen
- a qualifying Commonwealth citizen living in the UK
- an EU citizen living in the UK

If you live in **England and Wales**, you can register to vote at 16, but won't be able to vote until you are 18.

If you live in **Northern Ireland**, you can register if you are over 17 or will be 17 by 30 November, but won't be able to vote until you are 18.

If you live in **Scotland**, you can register at 14 years old, but you won't be able to vote at Scottish Parliament or Scottish Local Government elections until you are 16 or UK Parliamentary elections until you are 18

Can I vote if I'm in hospital because of my mental illness or detained under the Mental Health Act?

Most can – this includes people receiving community treatment (including those under a Community Treatment Order), voluntary inpatients, and people who are detained under the [civil sections of the Mental Health Act](#).

It also includes those with a condition that may impair their mental capacity. These individuals should also be given support to vote by their mental health trust.

Some can't – such as people detained under [forensic sections of the Mental Health Act](#). This includes people who have been convicted of a criminal offence and are detained in hospital.

Can I vote if I'm in prison?

You can still vote while in prison if you are

- Unconvicted (also called 'on remand')
- Convicted but not yet sentenced
- A civil prisoner –someone who is in prison for not paying fines or not doing what the court has told them to do (this is called *contempt of court*)

Sentenced prisoners are disqualified from voting, other than those described above.

If you are a prisoner in inpatient care who has been remanded to hospital under the [Mental Health Act on Sections 35, 36 or 48](#), you can still vote in a general election.

Registering to vote

How do I register?

You can [register online here](http://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote) (www.gov.uk/register-to-vote)

You may need the following, if you have them:

- Your National Insurance number
- Your passport if you're a British citizen living abroad, and want to vote in England, Scotland or Wales

There's a different process [to register anonymously](#), for example if you're concerned about your safety.

I don't have internet access - how do I register?

Contact your [local Electoral Registration Office](#) and ask them to post a form to you. You'll then need to return the completed form to your local Electoral Registration Office.

What's the deadline to register by?

This is usually two weeks before polling day.

I am a carer - can I register to vote on behalf of someone else?

Yes, as long as you have their permission to do so and have their details to hand.

My mental illness means that I am in hospital for long periods of time and therefore I don't have a permanent or fixed address - should I still register?

You can still register to vote if you don't have a permanent or fixed address. This could be because you are 1) a homeless person 2) a patient in a mental health hospital or 3) a person remanded in custody.

To register to vote, you need to fill in a form called a '*Declaration of local connection*'. You can get this from your [electoral registration office](#). Or you [can download and print a registration form](#).

If you are without a permanent address you should register from an address where you would be living if it were not for your current circumstances, or an address where you are staying temporarily or have lived at in the past.

If you do not have a fixed address you can give the address of somewhere where you spend a lot of time, like a friend or family member's home.

For more [information on registering to vote if you don't have a fixed or permanent address](#) go here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/register-to-vote-if-you-havent-got-a-fixed-or-permanent-address

What happens once I've registered?

- You will receive your polling card by post with information about where you should go to cast your vote in person.
- If (for some reason) you do not receive a polling card, make sure you phone the Electoral Services department in your local council so they can inform you where your local polling booth is located.

What happens to my data?

When you register to vote, your name is added to the electoral register and means that your name is only used for elections, preventing and detecting crime and checking applications for loans and credit.

However, the 'open register' is available to anyone who wants to buy a copy and is frequently used for marketing purposes. You can opt-out of the open version when you register.

If you are registering to vote [anonymously](#), (for example if you are concerned about your safety) your details will not appear on either version of the register.

I'm unsure which political party to vote for - should I still to vote?

Yes, once you are registered you will have the time to make up your mind about who to vote for before polling day.

Even if you choose not to vote, being on the electoral register can improve your credit rating score. You can also be fined for not registering to vote if you have been asked to do so by your local Electoral Registration Office.

Election day

How do I vote in person?

- Go to your polling station (between 7am and 10pm) on voting day.
- Speak to staff inside the polling stations so they can check that you are on the electoral register. You will then be given your ballot paper listing the parties and candidates to vote for.
- If you have a visual impairment, you can ask for a special voting device that allows you to vote on your own in secret.
- Read the ballot paper carefully, it will tell you how to cast your vote.
- When you exit the polling station you might be asked for your polling number but you do not have to give this information, but it does help the parties understand who voted on the day.



How do I find out where to vote?

The address of your polling station will be printed on your polling card.

To find your local polling station [visit this website \(www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a-voter/your-election-information\)](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a-voter/your-election-information)

Do I need ID or polling card to vote?

No, you don't need your ID or your polling card to cast your vote.

Can I vote online?

No, you can register to vote online but when it comes to casting your vote you need to either vote in person on the day, vote via post or vote via proxy.

Can I get assistance at the polling station to help me feel less anxious while I'm there?

- If you need any advice, just ask the staff at the polling station – they will be happy to help you.
- We recommend taking someone you trust with you to the polling station. You can also ask someone else to help you (for example, a support worker, as long as they are either a relative or an eligible elector and have not already helped more than one other person vote).

My mental illness means that the idea of going to a polling station makes me feel anxious, is there another way to cast my vote?

Yes, when you register to vote there is a section on the form which allows you to choose to vote by post or proxy.

- **By post:** you have to [apply in advance](#) to vote via post. You will be sent a ballot paper in the post about a week before election day, which you need to return in the post by 10pm on the day of the election. You can find more information [on voting by post here](#).
- **By proxy:** voting by proxy allows you to select someone else to vote for you. This could be a friend or family member. You need to fill in a special form to choose who will vote for you. You can find more information [on voting by proxy here](#).



If someone offers to help me at the polling station but I don't want them to, what should I do?

If anyone tries to offer you help but you feel uncomfortable or they try to take your postal vote from you, you should contact the police.

If you have any other queries, call your local council [here](#)

What should I do if I can't walk to the polling station?

- If you are a supporter of a political party then you could ask someone from that party to drive you to your polling station.
- If you have a carer, friend or key worker who could help, you could ask them to arrange for you to be driven to your polling station.
- You can also [contact your local authority](#) to find out what help is available.

I had a bad experience last time I voted, what can I do to make sure it doesn't happen again?

You can contact local authority ahead of polling day to find a solution in advance. Find out who they are [here](#).

How do I find out who my candidates are and what they stand for?

One the election is called, you can look up who your local candidates on the [BBC website](#) using your postcode.

Useful links and contacting us

Information on [registering to vote](http://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote): www.gov.uk/register-to-vote

Useful [information on voting](http://www.gov.uk/voting-in-the-uk) in the UK: www.gov.uk/voting-in-the-uk

Find and [contact your local authority](http://www.gov.uk/find-local-council): www.gov.uk/find-local-council

Contact us

Please get in touch if you have any questions on voting or campaigning during a general election.

You can reach the Rethink Mental Illness Campaigns Team by emailing campaigns@rethink.org or calling **0207 840 3103**.