



Election Guidelines 2023

Election Campaigns for:

Local Government Elections in England
Polling Day: 4 May 2023

Local Government Elections in Northern Ireland
Polling Day: 18 May 2023

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1. The Election Period

1.1 The Election Period and when the Election Guidelines and Appendices (“the Guidelines”) come into effect

Elections are taking place in England on 4 May and in Northern Ireland on 18 May; the formal Election Period begins in each nation 25 working days before polling day:

England: Monday 27 March at 00.01

Northern Ireland: Tuesday 11 April at 00.01

However, campaigning may begin earlier, so content producers should be sensitive to the need for particular care running up to each Election Period. Advice is available from the Chief Adviser, Politics.

There is no formal distinction during the election period between the days before and after the close of nominations. The close of nominations is on

4 April in England

24 April in Northern Ireland

The Guidelines remain in effect until the close of polls at 22.00 on polling day.

1.2 The Elections

England, by “First Past the Post”:

32 Metropolitan Borough Councils

46 Unitary Authorities

152 District councils

4 Mayoral Elections

Northern Ireland, by Single Transferable vote:

All 11 District Councils

For further information, please refer to the Appendix

1.3 The Guidelines

There is no area of broadcasting where the BBC’s commitment to due impartiality is more closely scrutinised than in reporting election campaigns.

These Guidelines are intended to offer a framework within which journalists:

- can operate in as free and creative an environment as possible,
- deliver to audiences impartial and independent reporting of the campaign, giving them fair coverage and rigorous scrutiny of the policies and campaigns of all parties.

The BBC is also legally obliged to adopt a Code of Practice with respect to “the participation of candidates at a parliamentary or local government election in items about the constituency or electoral area in question which are included in relevant services during the election period”. This obligation is fulfilled by Section 4 of these Guidelines.

The BBC is also required, under the terms of its Charter and Agreement to ensure that political issues are covered with due accuracy and due impartiality. These Election Guidelines supplement the Editorial Guidelines (Chapter 4, “Impartiality” and Chapter 10, “Politics, Public Policy and Polls”).

They should, in particular, be read in conjunction with the “UK Elections and Referendums” section of Chapter 10. This includes the following:

10.3.15 The BBC should make, and be able to defend, editorial decisions on campaign coverage on the basis that they are reasonable and carefully reached, with due impartiality. News judgements must continue to drive editorial decision-making in news-based programmes and those judgements at election time must be made within a framework of democratic debate. That framework should ensure that due weight is given to conveying, examining and challenging the views and policies of all relevant parties. UK-wide coverage must take account of and reflect the different political structures in the four nations of the United Kingdom.

10.3.16 The way in which due impartiality is achieved among parties will vary, depending on the format, output and platform. Deciding respective levels of coverage for different political parties, who have varying levels of political support, requires, primarily, good and impartial editorial judgement, rather than mathematical formulae. But content producers must take responsibility for achieving due impartiality in their own output without necessarily relying on other BBC content or services.

The Guidelines are publicly available and the BBC can expect to be held accountable for their implementation during the campaign.

BBC output with regard to the election period is also subject to Sections 5 and 6 of the Ofcom Code (except sections 6.8 – 6.12) and the associated Guidance Notes which is consistent with adherence to these Guidelines.

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/section-five-due-impartiality-accuracy>

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/section-six-elections-referendums>

1.4 Who the Guidelines apply to

It is the responsibility of each editor to ensure that their content producers are aware of how the Guidelines apply to their output.

Any programme which does not usually cover political subjects or normally invite politicians to participate must consult the Chief Adviser Politics in advance before inviting a politician, candidate or anyone who has taken a prominent political stance to take part in their output, or before accepting a request to participate. This is irrespective of whether their proposed contribution is itself 'political'.

The Appendix sets out information specific to this election.

Each programme, strand, website or channel must bear in mind the location of its intended audience in applying these Guidelines.

These Guidelines apply to any content intended for audiences in the UK, covering any aspect of the local elections in England and Northern Ireland during the respective dates of the Election Periods.

2. Summary of Mandatory Issues and referrals

2.1 During the Election Period:

- **Where content would not normally include political issues, political opinion or politicians (for example, sport, quiz/panel shows, factual entertainment) content producers must consult the Chief Adviser Politics in advance before inviting a politician (or anyone who has taken a prominent political stance) to take part in their output, or before accepting a request to participate. This reference is irrespective of whether their contribution to the output is itself 'political'. ***
- **All bids for interviews or proposals to profile UK party leaders must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics before parties are approached. Bids for party leaders in the nations should also be referred to the appropriate Heads of News in the nations. Offers of such interviews should also be referred before being accepted.**
- **Any proposal to use a contribution from a candidate without an opportunity for comment or response from any other parties or candidates must be referred to a senior editorial figure and the Chief Adviser Politics. (see context 3.5).**
- **The BBC will not commission voting intention polls for publication during the campaign.**
- **Any proposal to commission an opinion poll on politics or any other matter of public policy for any BBC service must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics.***
- **There will be no votes (online, SMS/text or social media) attempting to quantify support for a party, a candidate or a party political policy issue.**

- Any proposal to conduct a vote (online, text or social media) on any political issue that could have a bearing on any of the elections must be discussed with the Chief Adviser, Politics, as well as being referred to the relevant departmental senior editorial figure and ITACU.
- The BBC will not broadcast or publish numbers of e-mails, texts or other communications received on either side of any issue connected to the campaign.

* referral is also mandatory outside election periods.

2.2 Polling day (00.30 – 22.00)

- No opinion poll on any issue relating to the election may be published.
- There will be no coverage of any issues directly pertinent to the election campaigns on any BBC outlet or social media.
- It is a criminal offence to publish anything about the way in which people have voted in that election, based on information from /or taken from voters after they have voted.

3. Due Impartiality

3.1 Coverage of Parties and Candidates

To achieve due impartiality, each bulletin, programme or programme strand, as well as online and interactive services must ensure, in covering the elections, that the parties (and, where relevant, independent candidates) are covered proportionately over an appropriate period.

Determining appropriate levels of coverage should take into account levels of past and current electoral support (see Appendix) and Ofcom’s Digest, published 23 February 2023).

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/254450/election-digest-may-2023.pdf

Electoral support in the previous equivalent elections (see Appendix) is the starting point for making those judgements. However, other factors should be taken into account where appropriate, including evidence of variation in levels of support in other recent elections, changed political circumstances (e.g. new parties or party splits) as well as other evidence of current support. The number of candidates a party is standing may also be a factor.

Please note: With regard to the definition of “candidates” and also in relation to “empty-chairing”, Ofcom issued guidance on 11 January 2021:

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/210827/Note-to-broadcasters-Election-programming-May-2021-elections.pdf

3.2 Impartiality in Programmes and Online Content

Daily news magazine programmes should normally achieve proportional and appropriate coverage within the course of each week of the campaign.

This means that each strand (e.g. a drive time show on radio) is responsible for achieving impartiality itself within the week and cannot rely on other outlets at different times of day (e.g. the breakfast show) to do so for it. This does not preclude programmes, in specific circumstances, from co-operating to organise joint coverage, thereby achieving due impartiality across the station or channel. But such an arrangement needs clear sign-posting and should normally be referred to the Chief Adviser, Politics.

Programme strands should avoid individual editions getting substantially out of kilter. There may be days when inevitably one party dominates the news agenda, e.g. when party manifestos are launched, but in that case care must be taken to ensure that appropriate coverage is given to other manifesto launches, parties or candidates on the relevant days and that there is appropriate signposting forwards and backwards.

Weekly programmes, or running series within daily sequence programmes, which focus on one party or another, should signpost both forward and backwards so that it is clear to the audience that due impartiality is built in over time. In these instances, due impartiality should be achieved over the course of the campaign.

The same guidelines as those for programmes will apply to BBC Editorial content on all bbc.co.uk sites. These will apply to audio and video content as well as text content, e.g. blogs, podcasts and downloads, as well as any social media channels that are associated with the BBC, including material that appears on sites operated by third parties (see section 5 below).

Editorial Guidelines (4.3.12) say that *“we should not automatically assume that contributors from other organisations (such as academics, journalists, researchers and representatives of charities and think-tanks) are unbiased. Appropriate information about their affiliations, funding and particular viewpoints should be made available to the audience, when relevant to the context”*.

In the context of these elections, content producers will need to take all reasonable steps to be sure that contributors are appropriately described, and that they have taken account, for instance, of comments made by them on social media, how their organisations are funded and the nature of quoted research or polling. In reporting, in particular, on press coverage of the campaign and in newspaper reviews, they should also take account of any relevant subjective editorial stance.

Any programme or content giving coverage to the election must achieve due impartiality overall among parties during the course of the whole campaign.

Anyone who is in doubt as to how this applies to their own content should contact the Chief Adviser, Politics, for advice.

3.3 Coverage of other political issues and other elected bodies during the election Period

The election does not happen in isolation and other elected bodies will continue their normal activity during the campaign. Content producers need to comply with the general requirement of due accuracy and due impartiality, aware of the possible influence of any other political coverage on the election campaign.

This applies to all Parliamentary reportage during the campaign; some council business will also continue during the election period. These should continue to be covered in the normal way, though any issues relating to the election which are discussed in Parliament or councils must be reported with care to maintain due impartiality.

All content producers need to bear in mind which issues are within the remit of the different bodies and ensure it is clear to the audience when stories have a bearing on an election. They also should be alert to other party politicians, including ministers, shadow ministers and other party spokespeople and MPs at Westminster, who are not involved directly in the elections, intervening in issues relevant to the election and ensure that due impartiality is maintained. Some members of other elected bodies may also be candidates in this election; care should be taken to ensure that unfair advantage in the election campaign is not derived from their other political roles.

Where there are other major news stories, care is needed to ensure that any political element is covered comprehensively, but also reflects the fact that it is an election period. How this is achieved will depend on the particular circumstances of each case. For example, where there are major stories which fall outside inter-party rivalry, due impartiality may be achieved by allowing more time to those politicians most closely involved, reporting fully statements giving the audience factual information and, on occasion, reflecting vigorous internal debates within parties.

3.4 Order of Parties

The order in which parties appear in packages or are introduced in discussions should normally be editorially driven. However, programme makers should take care to ensure they vary this order, where appropriate, so that no fixed pattern emerges in the course of the campaign. Fairness may sometimes be best achieved – for instance, in debates - simply by drawing straws.

3.5 Items which may not require contributions from other parties or candidates

In exceptional circumstances, comments from candidates can stand alone, without any other political contribution, where to use one might appear insensitive or risk the appearance of a media circus. This might include interviews about a personal tragedy, a public disaster, or where the person concerned is an eye witness to a news incident. Any proposal to use a comment in this way must be referred to a senior editorial figure and the Chief Adviser, Politics.

4. Fairness to Candidates - Code of Practice

4.1 Reports and debates in specific Electoral Areas (eg Wards or District Electoral Areas)

The intention of these guidelines is to encourage vigorous debate and to give a higher profile to candidates in general, without giving unfair advantage to one candidate or party over another.

Candidates or parties declining to take part in electoral area reports or debates cannot, by doing so, effectively exercise a veto over such coverage.

However, this does not weaken in any way the BBC's obligations of fairness in ensuring the audience is informed of all main strands of argument: further advice should be sought, in such circumstances, from the Chief Adviser, Politics.

Programmes may decide to use either candidates or their representatives in items. But if a candidate is invited to take part, the other participants should, where at all possible, also be candidates. In exceptional circumstances, if a candidate is genuinely unavailable, the opportunity may be offered instead to a suitable party representative or substitute from within the electoral area (e.g. party official or agent) but it should normally be made clear to the audience that the missing candidate was invited and why they were unable to take part. If a party or candidate declines to put forward a representative or nominates someone in a way which risks unfairness to other candidates, the item/programme may go ahead without them.

Reports or debates about a specific electoral area should give due weight to candidates who have demonstrated substantial electoral support in that area (either through their own candidacy - for example, independents - or their party's). This means that if any candidate takes part in an item about a specific electoral area, then these other candidates should also be offered the opportunity to take part, or be given a similar opportunity across a series of reports.

Candidates or parties who have not demonstrated that they have substantial electoral support in that area must still be offered proportionate coverage. How that is achieved will be a matter for editorial judgment, but the following should be regarded as a minimum:

Short reports and items, including those online, which refer to only some of the candidates in an electoral area (or areas) should include, in sound and/or vision, a list of all candidates standing and their party (where applicable), or should refer to an online list of all candidates and parties standing (if before close of nominations, to a list of candidates so far). If such a report is being broadcast several times on the same channel or station, an online list of candidates should be referred to on each occasion and at least once the list should feature in sound and/or vision.

For longer items or programmes, such as debates - if not all the candidates are taking part - (or where there is no online list available for the relevant electoral area), then the candidates should be listed, in sound and/or vision, in addition to any reference to a full online list of candidates.

Content producers must ensure generally that candidates are not given an unfair advantage; for instance, camera operators should take care where a candidate's name is featured prominently through depicting posters or rosettes etc.

Where candidates have other roles – political or non-political - care should be taken to ensure that they do not gain an unfair advantage in the election campaign over other candidates.

Before the close of nominations, content producers need to ensure due impartiality in regard to any contributor who is expected to stand as a candidate.

4.2 Use of Candidates in issue based packages, wider debates and phone-ins

As well as debates or other items using candidates within electoral areas, all types of content may use an appropriate range of candidates from different electoral areas or to discuss together election issues. There may also be circumstances in which it is appropriate to use both candidates and non-candidates (for instance, where a party spokesperson is not standing, or for debates between party leaders.)

Reasonable references to local examples within an electoral area, for instance, to local hospitals, schools, examples of crime, etc, are allowed, providing it does not result in any unfairness to a candidate who is not taking part.

In order to maintain due impartiality, the choice of candidates or parties represented should be appropriate to the item. Who takes part and in what format, for instance, in debates, is a matter for editorial judgement, so long as that is exercised with due impartiality in the context of the election period.

The choice of individual to represent a party will be made on editorial grounds, but care must be taken over the course of the campaign to ensure that one candidate is not unduly favoured at the expense of others. A candidate taking part as a national spokesperson should not gain an unfair advantage over other candidates while discussing issues directly relevant to their electoral area. This may mean advising them in advance of the BBC's due impartiality obligations, or swift intervention by the presenter of a live programme, or editing before broadcast, as necessary.

Candidates may be encouraged to take part in phone-ins about the election or election issues. However, callers must be checked to see if they are candidates and it must be clear to the audience that they are speaking not as ordinary members of the public but as contributors with a political agenda. Care must be taken that over time programmes are not giving undue prominence to one party or undue preference to one candidate over others in the same electoral area. Care should also be taken – and advice sought - with regard to any contribution from a candidate during a phone-in or similar programme which is not about the elections or political issues more generally.

Please note: with regard to the definition of "candidate", in relation to its Rule 6.6, Ofcom issued guidance (on 11 January 2021):

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/210827/Note-to-broadcasters-Election-programming-May-2021-elections.pdf

Further advice on use of candidates can be sought from the Chief Adviser, Politics.

5. Online, Social Media and Audience Contributions

The same guidelines as those for programmes (see section 1.3 above) will apply to BBC editorial content on all bbc.co.uk sites. These will apply to audio and video content as well as text content, e.g. blogs, podcasts and downloads, as well as any social media identified with the BBC, including material that appears on sites operated by third parties.

5.1 Disinformation

Social and digital campaigning is now often a major battleground during elections and the threat of disinformation playing a part in the outcome is significant. Central to the BBC's approach to the election will be working to inform audiences about the democratic process and exposing disinformation, so they can make choices based on evidence they can trust.

5.2 Use of Social Media

BBC editorial staff and anyone involved in producing election-related content must avoid compromising the BBC's impartiality or bringing the BBC into disrepute by their activities, such as by expressing their own views (or endorsing the views of others) on political matters, either on personal websites or social media, eg personal Twitter accounts. (see amended guidance:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/individual-use-of-social-media>

5.3 Audience contributors

Audience contributions offer immediacy and interactivity to the BBC's output both broadcast and on the web. These contributions are an expression of opinion and are not an indication of the weight of opinion on one side or another of a question. The range selected for inclusion must be chosen to achieve due impartiality, not just by the weight of audience activity. However, we must not seek to achieve what might be considered "artificial" balance by giving a misleading account of the weight of opinion.

Audience contributions may come by text, social media message or email, or some other interactivity mechanism, including "vox pop". They may be unsolicited, or they may arise from calls to action, in either broadcast output or online. However we receive them, content producers should be rigorous about establishing the origins of materials offered as audience contributions and take responsibility for their authenticity. It may be necessary to verify that a contribution apparently from an individual in the public eye is genuine. Where such contributions come from candidates, that must be clearly identified.

All web pages prompting debate on the election will be properly moderated to encourage a wide range of views. Those parts of the BBC's online presence which do not normally engage in political issues must seek advice from the Chief Adviser, Politics, before doing so.

Unless specifically hosting election discussions, non-news sites should direct users who want to discuss the election to appropriate areas of the news site such as political blogs or relevant news articles. All election-related discussion areas on bbc.co.uk must have appropriate moderation, filtering and escalation in place.

Journalists and moderators will have to make fine judgements between remarks that constitute robust debate and personal abuse. The general rule of thumb should be if we would not broadcast it on radio or TV, it should not be online. Filters for harm and offence and personal abuse will operate as usual, but they should not be relied on as a substitute for effective moderation.

During the Election Period, we must not broadcast or publish numbers of contributions received on any campaign issue to estimate support for any side or party.

If contributions are edited for length, care should be taken to ensure that the contributor's opinions are fairly and accurately represented.

5.4 Vox Pops

The value of vox pops to programmes is to allow different sides of an issue in question to be expressed through the voices of the public. But the context should always make it clear that they are an expression of an argument, not an indication of the weight of opinion on either side. It follows that special care must be taken with vox pops during an election campaign, for instance, to give consideration to the location in which they are recorded and to edit them, when appropriate, in such a way as to ensure a range of views is reflected.

Vox pop should be commissioned sparingly with appropriate editorial purpose.

5.5 Audience Programmes

Any programme covering the election and planning to use a live audience (either in studio or online) should consult the Chief Adviser Politics to discuss the selection of the audience and how to achieve due impartiality. All such procedures must stand up to public scrutiny.

5.6 Material from parties or candidates

BBC News Online will not normally link directly to election-related material on the websites either of political parties or individual candidates, unless there is an editorial justification (e.g. a row caused by a prominent figure publishing policy on his/her website contradicting the manifesto on the party's website) and then it will be linked only for a limited period and mindful of any impartiality issues.

BBC News Online will list links to all available party sites, provided that it does not give strong grounds for concern that this breaches the BBC Harm and Offence

guidelines, the Ofcom Code, or the law e.g. defamation or incitement to racial hatred.

<https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines/harm-and-offence>

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/section-two-harm-offence>

Any speeches or other material published or contributed by candidates or parties which are carried in full or in part must be selected on news value, while bearing in mind that due impartiality requires that an appropriate range of such material is carried.

Content producers should be particularly alert to organised campaigns or lobbying by parties, pressure groups, candidates or people acting on their behalf. If mass mailings or other organised lobbying is suspected during the Election Period, contributors may be asked to provide contact details for verification purposes. The [bbc.co.uk](https://www.bbc.co.uk) escalation strategy must be activated immediately, and it may be necessary to, for example, put a message board into pre-moderation or read only mode.

6. Polls and other tests of opinion

Section 6 of the Election Guidelines should, where appropriate, be read in conjunction with Chapter 10 of Editorial Guidelines and the Editorial Policy Guidance “[Opinion Polls, Surveys, Questionnaires, Votes, Straw Polls](#)”, available on the Editorial Policy website.

6.1 Reporting Polls

During the campaign our reporting of voting intention opinion polls should take into account several key factors:

- they are part of the story of the campaign and audiences should, where appropriate, be informed about them;
- context is essential, and we must ensure the accuracy and appropriateness of the language used in reporting them;
- polls can be wrong - there are real dangers in only reporting the most “newsworthy” polls – i.e. those which, on a one-off basis, show dramatic movement. For that reason, we should not normally base a news story on a single voting intention poll, unless its impact has caused a separately newsworthy story.
- there may be particular issues around more informal referencing of polls, for instance, in presenters’ questions or correspondents’ 2-ways, when due accuracy and scepticism are as important as in more formally scripted reporting;
- care should be taken to ensure that assumptions about polling are not unduly driving the direction of broader editorial judgements.

So, the general rules and guidance about reporting polls need to be followed with particular care during the election period. They are:

- *the result of an opinion poll should not be the lead or be headlined in broadcast or other output, unless it has prompted a story which in itself merits being the lead or headlined and reference to the poll's findings is necessary to make sense of the story;*
- *not to rely on the interpretation given to a poll's results by the organisation or publication which commissioned it, but to come to our own view by looking at the questions, the results and the trend;*
- *to report the findings of voting intentions polls in the context of trend. The trend may consist of the results of all major polls over a period or may be limited to the change in a single pollster's findings. Poll results which defy trends without convincing explanation should be treated with particular scepticism and caution;*
- *not to use language which gives greater credibility to the polls than they deserve: polls "suggest" but never "prove" or even "show";*
- *the audience should be told when the reported difference between two significant parties is less than the margin of error of the polling methodology.*
- *to report the organisation which carried out the poll and the organisation or publication which commissioned it.*

In addition, particular care should be taken with newspaper reviews. The result of a poll should not be the lead item in a newspaper review and should always be reported with a sentence of context (e.g: "that's rather out of line with other polls this week").

No opinion poll on any subject relating to the election may be published on polling day until after the polls have closed.

6.2 Commissioning Polls

The BBC does not commission voting intention opinion polls during election periods. Editorial Guidelines say "*any proposal to commission an opinion poll on matters of public policy, political or industrial controversy, or on 'controversial subjects' in any other area, must be referred to the Chief Adviser Politics*".

Care must be taken to ensure that any poll commissioned by the BBC is not used to suggest a BBC view on a particular policy or issue. A poll may be commissioned to help inform the audience's understanding of a current controversy, but it should not be used to imply BBC intervention in a current controversy.

6.3 SMS/Online Voting

There will be no SMS/text or online votes attempting to quantify support for a party, politician or a party political policy issue during the election period, nor should other quantitative methods, such as a count of the number of texts or social media contributions, be used to assess the level of support.

Producers must ensure that votes are not translated into anything that could be construed either as a representation of public opinion as a whole, or the perception of a BBC opinion. Any proposal to conduct text or online voting on any political issue that could have a bearing on the election must be discussed with the Chief Adviser, Politics, as well as being referred to the relevant departmental senior editorial figure and ITACU.

7. Party Leader Interviews

Any proposal to interview or profile party leaders must be referred in advance to the Chief Adviser, Politics. For BBC Northern Ireland, referral should also be made to the Head of News and Current Affairs with regard to party leaders in Northern Ireland.

Offers of such interviews from the parties must also be referred before any can be accepted. This is in conjunction with the mandatory reference set out in the Editorial Guidelines (10.2.2) and is particularly important during these election campaigns.

8. Polling Day

There will be no coverage of any of the election campaigns on polling day, from 00.30 until polls close at 22.00 on TV, radio, bbc.co.uk or our official channels on social media and other websites. Online sites will not have to remove archive reports, but should not republish them.

Particular care should also be taken in personal use of social media on polling day.

Coverage on the day will be restricted to factual accounts with nothing which could be construed as influencing the ballots with regards to issues relevant to the election.

No opinion poll on any issue relating to the election may be published until after the polls have closed.

Whilst the polls are open, it is a criminal offence to publish anything about the way in which people have voted in that election, based on information from (or taken from) voters after they have voted.

9. Complaints

Complaints will be handled at the appropriate level from programme editors upwards. The aim is to ensure that whether a complaint has come via BBC Audience Services, direct to a programme or to a correspondent or individual journalist, from a politician or member of the public (who may or may not be a political activist), from a senior party official or an individual candidate, the BBC's response is consistent, robust and swift.

For that reason, normally, on receiving a formal complaint, details should be taken and referred to the appropriate person (normally the relevant editor) before any initial response – other than acknowledgement and timescale – is given to the complainant.

Complaints regarding the election, including those involving impartiality and accuracy, may be subject to an expedited process which could culminate with Ofcom.

Anyone requiring further advice on the application of these Guidelines should consult the Chief Adviser Politics.

Ric Bailey

Chief Adviser Politics

Email: ric.bailey@bbc.co.uk

A.1 Appendix – Guidance on Coverage of Parties and Candidates

The appendix applies to all UK-wide output, all content intended for Northern Ireland and all parts of England where elections are being held.

A1.1 Introduction

Deciding respective levels of coverage for different candidates in elections, who have varying levels of political support, requires, primarily, good and impartial editorial judgement. There will be legitimate differences in interpretation and application for different programmes and formats. The following guidance is aimed at ensuring there are appropriate levels of coverage, with some minimum level for smaller parties and independent candidates – **it does not set any maximum**. Advice is available, on a case by case basis, from the Chief Adviser, Politics, both before and throughout the campaign.

So although each outlet must ensure its coverage is proportionate with regard to parties and candidates, that should be treated as a guide rather than as a set mathematical formula. However, there must be good editorial reasons for any significant variation and these cannot supersede the over-riding obligation for due impartiality and fairness.

The relative amount of coverage given to political parties and independent candidates in each electoral area (for instance, across Northern Ireland as a whole, or within an individual ward or council) should reflect levels of past and/or current electoral support in that electoral area. In considering this, bearing in mind the location of the intended audience, performance at the last equivalent elections, over at least two electoral cycles, is taken as the starting point in terms of representation and share of the vote; the following factors must also be given due weight:

- performance in other elections, where relevant
- other relevant evidence of current electoral support, including robust patterns in relevant opinion polls.
- the number of candidates a party fields in the election
- other relevant editorial issues, such as electoral pacts, new parties, coalition agreements etc.

This Guidance will remain open to amendment due to any new relevant evidence of current electoral support until the day after the close of nominations.

A1.2 OFCOM

This Appendix is subject to Section 6 of the Ofcom Code (updated January 2019, and takes account of the associated Guidance Notes (22nd March 2017).

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/broadcast-codes/broadcast-code/section-six-elections-referendums>

Ofcom's Digest "Evidence of past electoral support and evidence of current support ahead of the various elections taking place on 4 and 18 May 2023" was published on 23 February 2023:

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/254450/election-digest-may-2023.pdf

It sets out some of the factors Ofcom takes into account in weighing different sorts of evidence when broadcasters take editorial decisions in relation to the elections and reflects the approach taken to complaints:

- * we place greater weight on the actual performance of a political party in elections over opinion poll data. This reflects the fact that electoral performance is a measure of how voters have actually exercised their democratic choice. This compares with the greater uncertainty associated with support in opinion polls, which may not translate into actual votes or seats at an election;*
- in considering past electoral support, we take into account factors such as the electoral performance of parties (including the numbers of elected candidates and overall percentage of vote received) in the previous set of corresponding elections over at least two electoral cycles;*
- we also take into account performance in other relevant past elections being contested at the same time, as well as performance in other recent past elections;*
- we take into account the electoral performance of parties over at least two electoral cycles when considering performance in any given type of elections. However, we place less weight on the evidence of electoral performance two or more electoral cycles ago given the historical nature of this evidence;*
- where relevant we consider evidence in relation to electoral performance in the different nations of the UK;*
- while putting less weight on levels of current support as opposed to actual performance, we put weight on evidence of current support that is objective and measurable. One type of objective and measurable evidence of current support is opinion poll data, where it is available. There may be other types of evidence of current support but in considering such evidence we would take into account the consistency and objectivity of each type of evidence; and*
- our intention is always to undertake a balanced assessment having regard to the totality of relevant evidence.*

A2 The Elections

England by 'First Past the Post'

32 Metropolitan Borough

- 9 whole council
- 23 one-third of seats

46 Unitary Authorities

- 32 whole council
- 14 one-third of seats

152 District councils

- 105 whole council
- 47 one-third of seats

4 Mayoral Elections (now also by First Past the Post):
Bedford, Leicester, Mansfield, Middlesbrough.

Total seats: 8057 (to be confirmed)

Northern Ireland, by Single Transferable vote:

All 11 District Councils (total of 462 seats across 80 District Electoral Areas)

A2.1 Coverage

This Appendix applies to content intended for England and Northern Ireland (including UK-wide and online material) when there is any coverage of the elections (during the respective Election Periods): as a whole, of an individual ward or council or a group of wards or councils.

Content producers should have regard to which policy areas are devolved or within the remit of local government, are in the domain of the relevant authorities, and therefore directly at issue in this election.

A3 England

Parties which have secured substantial electoral support across England during previous equivalent elections are:

The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

They should be represented with similar levels of coverage in appropriate election output (dependent on candidature).

Bearing in mind levels of electoral support and candidature, the Green Party should also be given coverage proportionate to the largest parties.

For UK-wide coverage and online, all other parties fielding candidates in at least one-sixth of the seats available in England (ie about 1350 seats out of

approximately 8100 being contested) should receive some coverage proportionate to the largest parties, where the elections are covered, including online.

Local and regional programmes covering the elections should take account of any different patterns of past/current electoral support and the number of candidates parties field in their areas, including smaller parties which may have insufficient candidates to reach the threshold for England as a whole.

Independent candidates attract significant levels of electoral support in many local elections and the audience will expect that to be reflected in relevant coverage. Relevant output should take into account the political context in which candidates are standing: for instance, where an independent candidate subscribes to a political party, or where a group of independents are acting together, whether or not on a common manifesto; the objective will be to ensure the audience is given clear and accurate information and that due weight is applied to the various political perspectives.

The audience will be referred, as appropriate and where possible, to a full list of parties and candidates standing, for instance, on council websites. For reports on individual wards where not all candidates are included, a full list of candidates and parties must be given, either as part of the report, or compiled online and directly referenced.

A4 Northern Ireland

Parties which secured substantial electoral support across Northern Ireland at the last equivalent elections are:

- Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), which should be represented with similar levels of coverage in appropriate election output; the three other larger parties, Alliance Party, the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) should be represented with similar levels of coverage to each other in appropriate election output. All five parties may receive similar levels of coverage where appropriate.

For coverage in Northern Ireland and online, other parties fielding at least 14 candidates in 14 different District Electoral Areas (ie one sixth of the total DEAs) should receive some coverage proportionate to the largest parties, where the elections are covered. Taking account of the last equivalent elections and other subsequent elections, the TUV, People Before Profit and the Green Party NI each have evidence of some electoral support and as such should receive, proportionately, more coverage than parties with less evidence of electoral support.

The principles applied to coverage of the smaller parties at a Northern Ireland-wide level should also be applied in any programme items which are based on a particular electoral area or council. The relative strengths of the parties will vary and again advice can be sought from the Chief Adviser, Politics, and the Head of News in Northern Ireland.

Independent candidates attract significant levels of electoral support in many local elections and the audience will expect that to be reflected in relevant coverage. Relevant output should take into account the political context in which candidates are standing: for instance, where an independent candidate subscribes to a political party, or where a group of independents are acting together, whether or not on a common manifesto; the objective will be to ensure the audience is given clear and accurate information and that due weight is applied to the various political perspectives.

The audience will be referred, as appropriate and where possible, to a full list of parties and candidates standing, for instance, on council websites or specifically published on BBC Online.

Further advice on coverage, including of smaller parties and independent candidates, can be sought from the Chief Adviser Politics.

A5 Context of Electoral support

Please see Ofcom Digest:

https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/254450/election-digest-may-2023.pdf