

# Department of Municipal Affairs & Housing

## *COVID-19 Guidelines for Municipalities to Administer an Election*

### **Overview**

Municipalities are to appoint a returning officer that will conduct all regular and special elections required under the act: Municipal Elections Act (MEA) Section 4(1)

The province has worked with representatives from the Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health and Elections Nova Scotia to develop these guidelines. While we encourage councils to consider alternative voting methods – electronic voting by telephone and internet – this document is a resource for returning officers if council has chosen to administer a paper ballot election. With the appropriate staff, venue and equipment, it is possible to safely conduct an election while adhering to public health orders.

In-person public election events could pose a greater risk of transmission of COVID-19 opposed to alternative voting methods. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that municipalities consider implementing electronic voting – which includes telephone and e-voting – to protect the health and safety of election staff and voters. To ensure community members are not improperly exposed to the coronavirus, municipalities should consider providing only electronic voting to minimize the risk of transmission. Per S146A of the MEA, municipalities may by by-law authorize voters to vote electronically.

Since the 2012 municipal elections, some municipalities have used only electronic voting to conduct their elections and have had success. Municipalities are responsible for determining how the election will be administered; providing only electronic voting eliminates the potential risk of transmission, costs associated with personal protective equipment, and the requirement to have physical polling locations. If a municipality chooses to conduct an in-person election, returning officers can use these guidelines as a supporting document when considering the administration of the election.

These guidelines reflect the public health order in place at the time at which they were developed. The guidelines will be updated as public health orders change. The date on the document indicates when these guidelines were last updated.

# General Information

## How is COVID-19 spread?

- COVID-19 is spread through large liquid droplets when a person infected with COVID-19 coughs or sneezes. The virus in these droplets can enter through the eyes, nose, or mouth of another person if they are in close contact with the person who coughed or sneezed.
- COVID-19 is not transmitted through particles in the air and cannot enter the body through the skin.

## What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

- The symptoms include fever (chills, sweats), cough or worsening of a previous cough, sore throat, headache, shortness of breath, muscle aches, sneezing, nasal congestion/runny nose, hoarse voice, diarrhea, unusual fatigue, loss of sense of smell or taste, and red, purple or blueish lesions, on the feet, toes or fingers without clear cause. Visit the [811 website](#) for more coronavirus symptoms.
- Some people experience little or no symptoms.
- Some people are more vulnerable to developing severe illness or complications from COVID-19, including older people and those with chronic health conditions.
- For more details about the coronavirus: <https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/>

# Health & Safety Guidance for In-Person Elections



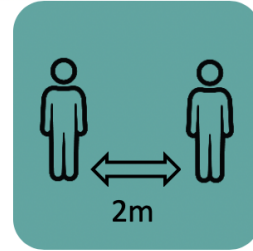
Place a protective screen between poll workers and voters



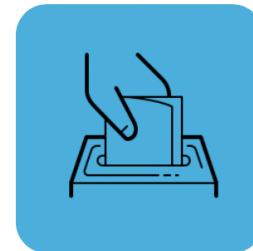
Provide a safe place to throw out wipes, gloves and masks



Supply hand sanitizer for residents and workers while at the poll location



Maintain a physical distance of 2 meters between voters, workers, and polling stations



Encourage people to consider proxy voting (see FAQ) if they are immunocompromised



Clean commonly touched surfaces frequently



Post rules and signage for workers, citizens, candidates, and agents to follow



Consider providing pencils to voters



Recommend that all workers and residents wear a non-medical mask



Communicate to residents the precautions your municipality is taking to ensure their safety

# Spacing Requirements

## The venue should:

- Enable staff, poll workers, and citizens to maintain a safe distance of two meters away from each other at all times. If two meters cannot be achieved it is recommended that
  - a non-medical mask is worn by all individuals
  - a protective screen be placed between staff and citizens / ballot boxes
- Try to provide one entrance and a different exit to help contain the traffic flow.
- Adhere to accessibility requirements – legally, municipalities are required to hold elections in accessible venues.

## Infection Control Measures

Generic posters are available on the Nova Scotia government coronavirus website (<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/resources/>). It is encouraged that municipalities consider using some of these templates for their venues.

Infection control measures can include:

- Advising election workers to stay home if ill and sending them home if they become ill while in attendance.
- Arranging seating within the venue with physical distancing between chairs/benches.
- Providing access to handwashing facilities and placing hand sanitizing dispensers or handwashing stations in prominent locations throughout the venue.
- Providing additional supplies such as tissues and lined waste containers.
- Cleaning high-touched surface areas frequently, such as ballot boxes, computers, desks, tables, railings, washrooms, writing utensils, doorknobs, light switches, and seating areas.

- Having poll workers wear non-medical masks and/or gloves to minimize infection
  - Frequent handwashing has shown to be more effective
- Avoiding sharing equipment like clipboards and computers between staff.
- Placing a self-screening tool at the entrance where staff and users do a self-assessment at arrival to ensure people who have symptoms or have been travelling do not put others at risk.
- Having alternate poll clerks on stand-by for if, and should, one of your poll workers begin to experience COVID-19 symptoms.
- Strongly recommending to residents to wear a non-medical mask when they come to vote.
- Placing visual and signage cues like floor markings to support physical distancing and traffic flow within the venue.
- Encouraging respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene.
- Cleaning pencils between each use or providing disposable/free pencils for people to use at the venue and take home.

### **Accommodating high-risk voters**

The municipality may want to consider the following to allow for those residents who are entitled to vote but could pose a health risk to others and/or are in a high-risk category for contracting COVID-19:

- Providing alternative voting methods for residents to cast their vote, such as telephone or e-voting.
- Communicating to residents their ability to use proxy-voting (see FAQ)
- Having Returning Officers discuss with Long-Term Care Facilities about appointing an individual who already works within the facility as a Deputy Returning Officer or Poll Clerk for the mobile poll.

To ensure success of the above methods, it is recommended that a municipality communicate these alternative options to residents prior to the election.

## **Campaigning**

- Candidates are encouraged to suspend in-person rallies and look to alternative options to run their campaign, such as on social media.
- Candidates are required to adhere to the public health protocols while campaigning, including maintaining a distance of 6ft.
- It is recommended that candidates wear non-medical masks while canvassing.

## **Accessibility**

Municipalities are legislated to have a polling station that has a level access premises and well-lit voting compartment. Level access is defined as a premises that is located so a person may reach the premises from the street or roadway and enter the premises without going up or down any steps, stairs, or escalators.

The municipal returning officer must secure suitable premises for one or more polling stations for each polling division in the municipality. It is suggested the returning officer visit each polling place to check the size and location of the room to be used and its level access. When visiting the polling station, the returning officer should consider level access for both the entrance and the exit of the building to maintain flow for physical distancing parameters.

# Voting on Election Day



## 1 Self Assessment

Before you go and vote, consider how you are feeling.



## 2 Wear a Mask

Consider wearing a mask while you go and vote.



## 3 Wash your Hands

Wash your hands upon arriving at the facility to vote with hand sanitizer or soap.



## 4 Follow the Signage

To help prevent exposure, follow the signage and respect the rules in place while voting.



## 5 Vote

Mark your ballot. After voting hand the ballot back to the Deputy Returning Officer. After they hand your ballot back to you, place it in the box.



## 6 Wash Your Hands Before Leaving

Wash your hands before you leave and follow the proper signage to the exit. Thank you for voting!

# Potential Contact & Mitigation Strategies

The following provides a list of examples as to when there could be potential transmission during an in-person election and possible mitigation strategies to look at adopting.

## POTENTIAL TRANSMISSION RISKS

- After voters mark the ballot it needs to be handed back to the deputy returning officer (DRO) to check the counter-foil. After checking the counter-foil, the DRO will return the ballot to the voter to place in the ballot box.
- Counting the ballots at the end of the evening
- Improper signage
- Candidates / agents looking at the polling book during a lull in voting
- Using the same pencils for each eligible voter
- Touching of doors and door handles in the entrance and exit of the facility

## MITIGATION STRATEGIES

- It is optional for the DRO to insert the ballot into the ballot box upon removing the counter-foil to prevent additional transmission. Eligible voters are entitled to place their ballot in the ballot box.
- DROs are to wash their hands prior to counting the ballots at the end of the evening and upon immediately completing the count.
- Signage and markings displayed in a clear manner for people to follow
- Candidates or agents should wash their hands and wear a non-medical mask prior to looking at the poll book.
- Disinfect pencils between each use, encourage voters to bring their own pencils, or provide free pencils to voters
- Frequently clean common surfaces



## Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Below is a list of frequently asked questions that may come from residents in your community surrounding the election. We encourage municipalities to communicate these answers to people in their community prior to election day.

### **What does alternative voting methods mean?**

Alternative voting methods are ways to vote other than in person. These alternative voting methods can include voting electronically by internet or by telephone. Municipalities providing alternative voting methods ensures those who are immunocompromised do not have to leave their house and can still vote.

### **Are municipalities required to have a paper ballot election?**

No. A municipality may by by-law provide for voting through a means other than a paper ballot. The by-law may authorize voting by mail, electronically, or by another voting method. If the by-law provides for voting via the internet through the unsupervised use of a personal computing device, the by-law must also permit voting by some other means on each advance polling day and on ordinary polling day, but the act does not require that the other means be a paper ballot.

### **Can someone decide to use a proxy voter the morning of election?**

No. The deadline to use proxy-voting is the eighth day before ordinary polling day – October 9, 2020. The person who wants to vote by proxy or the proxy voter must submit an application before the returning officer to establish their proxy. It is recommended that the individuals visiting the returning officer to apply for proxy voting wear a mask. Upon review of the application, a proxy paper will then be issued.

### **What if long-term care facilities are closed to outside visitors? How will I be able to ensure the residents inside are able to exercise their right to vote?**

Long-term care facilities are now open to visitors. It is expected that visitors wear masks. The Municipal Elections Officer is still going to be discussing with Department of Health and Wellness to ensure that if long-term care facilities are closed to visitors again, that there may be an opportunity to appoint an individual with already cleared access to support the returning officer as a deputy returning officer. This will require the cleared individual to take an oath and assist the returning officer in collecting the votes from the individuals within the long-term care facility.

## Can candidates knock on doors as part of their campaign?

Candidates must follow the public health orders that are in place at the time. Candidates are encouraged to look to new ways to campaign during this time. If candidates wish to knock on doors, public health protocols of six foot physical distancing and wearing a non-medical mask is strongly recommended.

## Additional Resources

Below is a list of additional resources that returning officers and municipalities may find useful when considering administering an election in-person.

### Posters available to use

<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/docs/COVID-19-cough-and-sneeze-etiquette-poster-en.pdf>

<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/docs/COVID-19-physical-distancing-sign.pdf>

<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/docs/Hand-Washing-Poster.pdf>

<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/docs/New-Normal-Poster-EN.pdf>

<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/docs/Staying-Healthy-Habits-EN.pdf>

### Prevention Checklist

<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/docs/COVID-19-prevention-plan-checklist.pdf>

### Additional Resources

<https://novascotia.ca/coronavirus/resources/>