

What's involved in being a General Election Candidate?

Chris Rose, National Election Agent. Updated 15/12/16

Importance of the General Election and strategic considerations

General elections are taken more seriously by the general public and the media than any other kind of election in the UK. It is therefore important that the Green Party puts up a credible performance in such elections. This requires, amongst other things, that it stands enough candidates to qualify for a party election broadcast, that preferably it stands more candidates than at the previous general election (though this may be rendered difficult if there is a 'snap' election), and, ideally, that it stands more candidates than other smaller parties.

It is important that members putting themselves forward for selection understand the local, regional and national strategic frameworks within which they are being asked to operate, and are willing to abide by them. It is all too easy to get carried away on a tide of adrenaline once the election is imminent and to squander resources – time, money, materials and goodwill – on activities that deliver a poor return on the investment.

For the majority of local parties and their candidates the campaign for the next general election should not primarily be about the result on whatever day polling day is. The most important consideration is how effectively the work done in the run up to the general election, and the follow-through afterwards, contributes to significantly improved prospects for winning principal authority council seats.

In constituencies containing target wards, the focus throughout therefore needs to be on working those Wards with proven election-winning methods, particularly canvassing and locating Green voters, which will enhance the party's standing there for the future. This has clear implications for the kind of work members and supporters need to be encouraged to do, the geographical spread of that work and the husbanding of resources to ensure that the momentum of local government targeting work is maintained and enhanced post-general election.

In other constituencies, we need to do things that will add to, and not detract from, such efforts. Simply by adding to the number of candidates, the party can expect more media coverage locally, and greater national credibility. The emphasis here needs to be on activity that requires limited person hours and low expenditure – such as conventional media work and web presence - so that more people and money can be directed to target areas. Where resources are very limited, candidates in these lower key constituencies should not expect to have freepost leaflets, and may not have any leaflets. Before fretting about that too much, think how many bits of paper come through your door that go straight in the recycling bin!

The biggest boost the party can get to its chances of better at the general election after next, in both target and non-target constituencies, is to hold its existing seat and get within credible range of winning others in 2025 (or sooner), and by electing significant numbers of councillors in the meantime. Details of agreed national target seats will be provided elsewhere. If you can't get to these then we will be circulating lists of secondary targets and local election target

seats for members to help in at the appropriate times. It is critical that local parties around the country assist our target constituencies, and we expect candidates to provide a lead on that from their own area. It's important that help is provided with pre-election work, so this need not clash with your local efforts too much, and will provide valuable hands-on training experience. There are also ways of helping from afar, such as by telephone canvassing and knocking up.

Legal qualifications for and disqualifications from standing

Before putting yourself forward for selection, you need to check that you are qualified to stand as a candidate at the general election.

The national party's constitution states that 'Nominees must expect to be legally qualified, and not disqualified, from being a candidate at the time of the election.' An example of someone being disqualified from standing at the time of nomination for selection, but qualified at the time of election, is the 17 year old who will be 18 before close of nominations for the election proper. NOTE that a candidate must be qualified and not disqualified at the time of their nomination, as well as on the date of the election.

To be qualified to stand:

- Nominees must be 18 on the date of their nomination for the election proper as well as on the date of the election.
- And be British subjects (including Commonwealth citizens) or citizens of the Republic of Ireland. They do not have to be resident in the U.K., or be, or be qualified to be, on the electoral register here.

Certain categories of people are not eligible to stand for Westminster elections in the U.K. In general terms these categories are as follows:

- 'Aliens' - persons not fulfilling the above-mentioned citizenship requirements
- Certain Government/Crown employees
- Bankrupt (Bankruptcy in itself is not a disqualification. If you are or have been bankrupt you are not disqualified from standing or remaining elected on that basis. Only those who are subject to a bankruptcy restrictions order or interim order are disqualified from standing for election or remaining elected. The disqualification ends at the same time as the order ends. If in doubt seek advice from the National Election Agent)
- Convicts in jail, or at large when they should be detained
- Persons disqualified - by reason of having been convicted of corrupt practices and who have consequently been banned from standing.
- Church of England Clergy may stand for Westminster elections unless they are a Bishop presently sitting in the House of Lords.

Those who are qualified to stand are entitled by law to do so in any U.K. Westminster constituency.

The existing party rules also require that you have been a member of the Green Party of England and Wales for at least one year by the last possible date for the election in May 2020,

and must hold continuous membership up to the date of the election during that period. You must have two nominators who must be fully paid up members of the GPEW. However, an exemption from the membership requirement for nominees may be granted by Regional Council if at least ten nominating signatures are obtained. In each case nominators must be members who are resident in the area being balloted for the selection in question. Local parties may choose to adopt Regional Council's proposed amendment to this, which requires you to have instead been a member of GPEW for one complete year prior to the first opening of nominations for candidates with the same additional conditions and caveat still applying. It will be up to the Returning Officer for the selection ballot to ensure that members are informed in good time as to which cut-off point has been agreed.

Selection process

The basic rules governing the selection process are laid down in the national party constitution, which is available in full from the members' pages of the party's website. The parts that pertain to general election candidate selection are provided in the 'Parliamentary selection guidelines and rules' document. However, for the purposes of conducting a selection procedure, these are issued to local party returning officers along with considerable additional guidance, and further elaborations may be added by the decisions of the relevant local party/ies covering a given constituency. Nominees should be supplied with a copy of the finalised material by their RO. All general election candidates must be selected according to the agreed rules, otherwise the party's Nominating Officer will refrain from issuing the paperwork enabling them to use the description 'Green Party' on the General Election ballot paper.

A Local Party first needs to decide which constituency/ies it wishes to contest. If it decides to field one or more candidates, then it is obliged to put out a formal call for nominations to members. It may decide to cast the net wider and invite nominees from neighbouring areas.

If there is not at least one female nominee after the first call for nominations, there must be a second call.

There must be a hustings meeting, at which members are afforded the opportunity to question nominees.

The ballot, which must include provision for postal voting, will close after the hustings. Irrespective of how many nominees there are, voters must be given the option of voting for 'Re-open nominations' as an indication that they do not think that any of the nominees on offer would make a suitable candidate. Voting is by Single Transferable Vote.

Candidate's statements are circulated ahead of the vote, usually with the ballot papers.

The Party needs to be protected as best possible from adverse publicity about the personal record and behaviour of its candidates. Just as importantly, it owes it to the public to ensure that the candidate we put before them is fit for the job. To this end the national constitution now requires that 'Nominees shall be asked to declare anything which they consider likely, or that may in law be prejudicial to their position as a candidate or as a MP or would bring the Party into disrepute.'

Due to a desire to be ready for any snap general election in the wake of Brexit vote, but mindful of the length of time before one is due under the fixed term parliament act, Regional Council has proposed that 'early' selections may be made which build in a provision for 'confirmation hearings' to determine at intervals whether the selected candidate should carry on, or a new selection should be made. Local parties have been advised that if they decide to go down this route, and since this is not currently a constitutional requirement, they should get nominees to state in writing at the time of nomination whether agree to abide by this procedure or not. This would minimise the risk of challenges further down the line from someone who said 'fine' at first, but then changed their mind if they later became subject to what would amount to 'de-selection' by this means later on.

What support and exposure will I get as a general election candidate?

To a large extent this will depend on the level of campaign that the local party has decided to run in the constituency that you wish to put yourself forward for.

The law requires that you appoint an election agent who will be legally responsible for the conduct of your campaign, the financial aspects of it and submitting a return of expenses (set of accounts for the campaign) after the election. The local party should be able to recommend a member who you can appoint as your election agent.

The local party should take the lead in ensuring that sufficient money is raised to finance the agreed campaign activities. Whilst candidates often contribute money towards their campaigns, it is a legal requirement that donations go through their election agent. All sides should be clear about whether any monies are a donation or a loan, and if the latter, when it will be repaid by.

It is important to understand that as a candidate you will be a public figure, and that the local, regional and national party will be providing media outlets and NGOs with contact details for yourself and your campaign team members. It is likely that your photograph, biographical and contact details will be made public on party and other election-related websites. If there is a problem with giving out some personal contact information, then an alternative address, phone number and e-mail address will be needed. In past elections the party has set up @greenparty.org.uk addresses for candidates.

The local party is also expected to provide a press officer. If you are contacted by the media it is perfectly acceptable to make a note of their questions and say that you or the press officer will ring back shortly with a considered response. This will give you time to get advice or ensure that someone who may be better qualified speaks to them.

Your name and address and a list of the names of the people who nominated you will be posted, along with those of other candidates, on Notices of Election for the constituency - but only election die-hards will take much notice! Your address will also appear (in small print) beneath your name on the ballot paper unless you make use of the new piece of legislation which allows you to have this 'hidden' and replaced by just the name of the constituency you reside in. We would not recommend this in normal circumstances. Politicians already look too aloof from the public they are supposed to serve.

If your constituency has target wards within it, you should be expected to help lead the line on canvassing those areas during the campaign, for example.

Even when running a low-key campaign, candidates do need to be willing to attend public meetings organised by local groups of one sort or another if their local party believes that the nature of the organisation and the likely attendance make it important to do so.

You will not be alone!

The regional and national parties will between them be providing candidate, agent and press officer training. The national party will produce a manifesto and associated policy briefings and other literature and campaigning materials. It will produce a party election broadcast. There will be a campaign launch and other events designed to attract publicity for the party and its candidates. Advice will be given on the relative importance of the questionnaires all candidates can expect to receive from NGOs. Sets of model answers may be provided for the high priority ones. National target seats will receive additional support.

Ongoing support in terms of campaign organisation, deadline reminders, legal issues, political briefings and so forth are sent out to candidates and their teams by the elections department using an electronic mailing list to which candidates and agents are automatically subscribed, or through the party's membership system mailing function.

National party press releases and material from other parts of the party that can be 'recycled' for local media use are available through the gmedianet e-list to candidates and press officers who wish to subscribe.

In addition, national and regional election agents and press officers are on hand to give advice when these other channels haven't catered for your particular need.

Election and related resources will also be made available through the member's website.

The bare minimum requirements

The absolute bottom line is that the law requires candidates to do the following:

Nomination process

(Your election agent will provide you with the relevant forms, explain things and will usually handle submission of the paperwork to the returning officer who runs the election).

- Fill in the form on which you appoint your election agent. If you do not do so you will automatically be deemed to be your own agent.
- Sign the consent form saying that you are prepared to stand and that you are qualified to do so (i.e. that you are over 18, a UK, Irish or Commonwealth citizen, etc.) and not disqualified.
- Sign a form to say that you want the Green Party emblem next to your name on the ballot paper.

- Sign within 35 days of the election a declaration that you've seen your election agent's return of expenses and that to the best of your knowledge it is correct.

You'll ideally do these things too:

- Get the signatures for your nomination paper of 10 people registered to vote in the constituency you are standing in. Somebody else in your local party can do this for you or help you.
- Whilst the law doesn't require it, we expect general election candidates to attend the counting of the votes. Your partner, agent and a certain number of counting agents (appointed by yourself or your Agent) are entitled to go, so you need not be on your own. It is important to see how well the Green Party has done and by monitoring a sample of votes from each ballot box you can see in what parts of the constituency you have done best.

Do bear in mind that the chance of you of getting elected outside of a national target constituency is zero. The party may still get less than 5% in many seats and lose the £500 deposits. But the benefits of standing will outweigh this cost. You will be making an investment in the party's future success.
