

Declarations of identity (Northern Ireland)

Function

Postal voters in Northern Ireland have to complete a declaration of identity and return it along with their ballot paper for their vote to be counted. The voter must complete their declaration of identity in the presence of a witness, who must then complete the witness declaration section on the same document.

Postal voting materials have several functions: to enable the voter to vote on the ballot paper; to obtain the voter's personal identifiers and witness's details; and to enable the voter to return their vote in time for it to be counted.

Because voting by post is relatively complex, involving at least two documents the voter must complete, plus two envelopes in which to enclose and return the documents, it is crucial that the materials provide clear, simple instructions, which are easy to follow, and that the documents themselves are similarly clear and simple to use. Postal voting is often used by people who would experience particular barriers to voting, and feel it is easier to vote at home. Postal voting should not be more difficult than voting in a polling station and the process itself should not act as a barrier to the voter.

Style

- Print the declaration of identity in A4 size.

Explanation

- A4 size allows for text to be in a large enough font size to be easily read, with enough space to lay out the information clearly, and enough room for the sections that have to be filled in.

- Give each separate section of the declaration of identity a heading.

i Explanation

- Headings help guide people through the declaration of identity and understand what each part is about.
- Headings also help to break up the declaration of identity into smaller sections, so it looks easier to read, rather than just having a continuous body of text.
- Headings also mean people can quickly find the section they want (e.g. 'how to get help').

- Use visual aids, e.g. icons and diagrams to illustrate information and instructions.

i Explanation

- Icons help to identify and distinguish between different types of information.
- Diagrams are particularly useful to show people how to fill in parts of forms.
- Pictures help to help the message in the text and are particularly helpful for people who have difficulty reading or following written instructions.
- Pictures also help the declaration of identity to look visually appealing and help draw people into reading it.

- Keep the voter and witness sections clearly separate and label each so it is clear which section is for the voter to complete, and which is for the witness.

i Explanation

- Labelling each section and making them visually distinct makes it clear that there are two sections to be completed by two different people.

- Make it clear which sections of the declaration the voter needs to complete, and with what information (i.e. date of birth, not the date that they signed it):
 - Use bold lines to highlight boxes.
 - Use arrows to signpost to the boxes that need to be filled in.
 - Put a label next to the box to say what should go in it.

- Avoid using ‘DD/MM/YYYY’ labels. Use the full words: ‘day’, ‘month’, ‘year’.
- Ensure the signature box is large enough to accommodate long or large signatures.
- Put a solid border around the signature box so it is clear what space the voter has to keep inside. A pale grey or thin line is not easy to see.


Content and structure

- Put a title on each document.

Explanation

- Having a title helps the voter understand what the document is, and also means the instructions can refer to the document names, making them easier to follow.

- Lay out the declaration of identity in a logical order:
 - Put background information first, along with key information needed to complete the declaration (e.g. ‘please use black ink’).
 - Arrange the sections in the order that they should be followed or completed.
 - Give information and instructions at the point they are needed, and before the action they relate to. Do not put all the instructions together, or all on the back.
 - Do not include instructions for completing the ballot paper on the postal voting statement. The ballot paper should have clear instructions on it, which can also be included in the ‘quick-start’ guide.

 Postal voting guidance (Section 4D)

Explanation

- The instruction for each task should be with the task, so the voter does not have to find it somewhere else.
- Putting all the instructions together makes them off-putting, difficult to follow, and means the voter has to flip back and forth between the instruction and the part of the document they are trying to fill in.
- Instructions on the back get missed when people are filling in the front of the form.
- Having separate sections helps the voter to focus on completing each task in turn.

- Include a clear explanation, before the section the voter has to complete, of:
 - the need for a witness, emphasising that the witness is witnessing their declaration and not their vote
 - what the witness has to do and what they have to witness
 - who can be a witness

i Explanation

- An explanation helps the voter to understand what the witness is for, and when they need to be present.
- It also reassures the voter that the witness is witnessing their declaration, not their vote, and that their vote is secret.

- In the written information and instructions, include information about deadlines and timescales (e.g. when talking about getting a replacement ballot paper, or returning your vote). Include:
 - when each deadline is
 - what to do if the voter has missed the deadline, or thinks they might miss it

i Explanation

- Including information about deadlines makes sure people know exactly when they need to do things by, and means they do not lose out on their right to vote if they think they have missed the deadline.

- Include information about what to do if you make a mistake or need another declaration of identity or ballot paper. The information should:
 - be prominent, and included early on in the declaration of identity
 - be repeated or referred to at other key points where the voter may need help or assistance
 - make clear the distinction between getting help (permitted) and someone interfering with your vote (not permitted)
 - explain precisely what to do, how, and when, and how this fits with other deadlines and timescales in the voting process
 - include information about call costs, if help is available by telephone

i Explanation

- It should be clear to the voter from the outset that they can get help if they need it, and how to do so, so that they are not put off completing and returning their vote if they get stuck.
- Many people will be on their own without access to someone to help them. Making it clear that help is available reassures the voter and encourages them to seek assistance if they need it, and avoids them having to struggle unnecessarily.
- People want to know how much a telephone number costs before they ring it – they may be put off if it is not a free phone or local rate number.

- Explain in the information why the voter's signature and witness's details are being asked for.

i Explanation

- An explanation helps people understand what information they need to provide (i.e. identification of themselves, rather than signing and dating as you would usually do on a form).
- It also avoids suspicion about why information is being asked for, which can lead to people missing it out altogether.

- Put the signature box as the last task the voter has to complete.

i Explanation

- Having the signature last fits with the usual way of completing a form. People think when they have signed, they have finished, and will stop. Anything they need to complete on the declaration should come before this.