Northern Territory
Electoral Commission

2020 Territory Election
Covid-19 Management Plan
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1. Executive Summary

The NT Legislative Assembly General Election (2020 Territory Election) is scheduled to occur on Saturday, 22 August 2020, a date determined by the Electoral Act 2004 (the Act).

The Northern Territory Electoral Commission (NTEC) is required to manage and deliver the 2020 Territory Election to comply with the directions and advice provided by the Commonwealth and Northern Territory governments in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Circumstances can change quickly in a pandemic. While at the time of publication, the Northern Territory was showing signs that COVID-19 was controlled and cases has declined to zero, it is acknowledged that, at any time, there could be an outbreak. The NTEC will be required to respond to changing conditions and requirements and will update relevant public documents where required.

To ensure the 2020 Territory Election can be delivered during a pandemic, it is important that preparation and contingency planning continues to occur. This will allow, within reason, the election to be conducted as safely and responsibly as possible.

The primary objective of the NTEC's plan for the delivery of the 2020 Territory Election is to keep the community safe and limit the spread of COVID-19. There has been a focus on addressing issues of hygiene and social distancing, and limiting the number of people in one location such as a voting centre.

The NTEC will encourage voters to use early and postal voting. Both options will limit the congregation of people in one location, and allow Territorians to vote without having to travel. It is expected there will be an increase in electors utilising these voting methods at the 2020 Territory Election instead of attending a voting centre on election day.

Standard operating procedures and documents are being developed to ensure a consistent approach is adopted, especially at early voting centres, mobile voting locations and voting centres on election day.

It is acknowledged that COVID-19 restrictions will have a significant impact on candidates and their campaigning. The NTEC is consulting with health staff to provide advice about campaigning around voting centres.

The NTEC will deliver a communications campaign in three phases. The first two phases will focus on awareness and enrolling to vote. The third phase will focus on the changes to voting as a result of COVID-19. A communications plan is being developed to ensure all key changes are communicated to affected electors.

At the time of publishing, restrictions for access to remote communities under the Biosecurity Act 2015 (Cth) were lifted on 5 June, 2020. This allows the NTEC to re-commence face-to-face electoral education and awareness campaigns in remote communities, which had previously been postponed due to COVID-19 concerns. It will also mean the NTEC can offer its traditional mobile voting services in remote locations, while adhering to the protection measures in place at the time and limiting contact with community members.

This plan and related documents may need to be altered at any time to adapt to changes resulting from a response to COVID-19. Any updated plan will be based on the most up-to-date advice from health and government staff.

Procedural and operational documents will be developed in consultation with health staff and made available to complement the plan. The documents will provide further detail for voters, NTEC staff, as well as candidates and campaigners.
2. Context

2.1. COVID-19

COVID-19 is a respiratory illness caused by a new coronavirus which includes symptoms of fever, coughing, sore throat and shortness of breath which may result in death. It is a particular danger to medically vulnerable or aged people. On 30 January 2020, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern and has since named the spread of the virus a pandemic.

The Australian Health Protection Principle Committee has advised that the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to span more than six months. The Australian Government, states and territories are planning accordingly.

2.2. Northern Territory

In line with advice from the Australian Government, the Northern Territory has introduced measures to assist in the management of COVID-19.

While several restrictions are being relaxed in the Territory from early May 2020 it is expected that some measures will remain in place for the foreseeable future. This includes general principles relating to physical distancing and hygiene.

2.3. Impact on 2020 Territory Election

The 2020 Territory Election is scheduled for Saturday, 22 August 2020, in accordance with section 23(1) of the Act.

The NTEC is developing plans and procedures to ensure all Territorians can exercise their right to vote while protecting voters, NTEC staff, candidates and associated political staff and campaigners.

General principles have been developed by DOH that apply to all Territorians. The NTEC will use the following guiding principles to assist in the delivery of the 2020 Territory Election.

Physical distancing:

- A minimum space of 1.5 metres between people who aren’t from the same household.
- If there is a requirement to be facing another person less than 1.5 metres away, minimise contact to less than 15 minutes.

Hygiene:

- Avoid touching your face and cough or sneeze into a tissue or into your elbow.
- Wash hands with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser before and after any contact with surfaces that are used by more than one person.
- Regularly clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched by more than one person – e.g. phones, door handles, benches, equipment.
- Avoid sharing implements e.g. cups or objects that you touch.

A protocol for the suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 by NTEC staff will be developed, ensuring there is a clear process for escalating health matters, and reducing the risk of spreading COVID-19 throughout the community.
3. **Purpose**

This document is a high level plan which outlines how the NT Electoral Commission will deliver the 2020 Territory Election within the parameters of protection measures in place for the response to COVID-19.

The NTEC’s overall strategy for responding to COVID-19 and the delivery of the election is to:

- protect the health and safety of voters
- protect the health and safety of NTEC staff
- follow the directions of health and government authorities to prevent, where possible, further spread of COVID-19
- respond promptly and effectively to minimise the impact of the virus including:
  - encouraging physical distancing and personal hygiene management strategies
  - complying with advice from the Australian and Northern Territory health authorities to prevent and minimise further outbreaks

4. **Governance**

The NTEC is an independent government agency responsible for the impartial conduct of Northern Territory Legislative Assembly and NT local government elections.

Preparing an election with adherence to measures in place due to COVID-19 requires a high level of coordination and planning. To ensure there is coordination across key government agencies, the NTEC chairs a working group consisting of representatives from:

- Department of the Chief Minister
- Department of Health
- Department of Attorney-General and Justice
- Department of Corporate and Information Systems.

5. **Protection measures**

The NTEC has developed a range of measures to protect voters and NTEC staff from the further spread of COVID-19 and to assist in the containment of the virus. Operating procedures are being developed to ensure a standard and consistent approach is adopted at all times and locations, including at early, mobile and election day voting centres. The protection measures are being developed in consultation with the Department of Health (DOH). Details will be made available on the NTEC website shortly.

5.1. **Protection measures for voters**

The following key protection measures will be adopted to limit the spread of COVID-19 among voters:

- single-use pencils
- encouraging postal and early voting
- social distancing with guides on the floor at voting centres
- ensuring voting screens are a minimum 1.5m apart
- additional cleaning of surfaces by a hygiene officer
- providing hand sanitiser for voters and hygiene protocols for NTEC staff
- additional early voting centres
• additional operating hours for early voting centres
• procedures for travel to remote locations by NTEC staff to minimise contact with communities
• assessing all indoor mobile voting locations to determine their ability to comply with social distancing, and introducing more outdoor mobile voting sites, where suitable indoor locations cannot be sourced
• Compliance Team members from DOH to ensure electors adhere to social distancing requirements at voting centres in regional locations.
• procedures for suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 by NTEC staff

Voting is compulsory. However, if voters are displaying symptoms of COVID-19 they are instructed to not attend a voting centre.

5.2. Protection measures for NTEC staff

The following protection measures will be adopted to limit the spread of COVID-19 among NTEC staff:
• tablets used will be sanitised regularly or between staff for marking off the electoral roll
• having physical distancing guides to distance voters and NTEC staff during the marking off of the electoral roll and scrutineering
• additional cleaning at voting centres
• procedures for NTEC staff travelling to remote locations to minimise contact with community members
• frequent use of hand sanitiser
• procedures for suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19 by NTEC staff

6. Voting options

There are four voting options available to Territorians:

• early voting
• postal voting
• mobile voting
• election day voting.

In response to COVID-19, the NTEC has assessed each voting option available and made relevant changes where necessary. The key principles of practising good hygiene and social distancing have been at the forefront when developing strategies and procedures to minimise the spread of COVID-19.

The NTEC recommends as many voters as possible opt to use early and postal voting services. Both options will limit the congregation of people in one location, and allow Territorians to vote without having to undertake additional travel. It is expected that the convenience of early and postal voting services, along with a conscious effort by Territorians to avoid crowded locations due to COVID-19, will result in an increased uptake of these types of voting methods, and therefore assist in limiting crowd sizes at voting centres on election day.

While voting is compulsory, if voters are displaying symptoms of COVID-19 they are instructed not to attend a voting centre. Electors may utilise postal voting where timelines permit.

Mobile voting will continue in remote communities where postal voting is often not a viable option due to the unreliability and timeliness of remote mail services. The changes to mobile voting due to COVID-19 will mostly affect NTEC staff, with the need to change procedures and policies around travel and hygiene. Where possible, changes to mobile voting will be minimised for voters.
While efforts will be made by the NTEC to increase early and postal voting, it is acknowledged that many voters prefer the traditional method of voting on election day at a voting centre. Measures will be taken to ensure social distancing and hygiene advice is followed and practised. If more electors choose to vote early or by post, queuing will be reduced at election day voting centres.

A 2016 amendment to the Act allows electors who are entitled to enrol, but who are not on the electoral roll at the close of roll, to still enrol and vote at voting centres. These electors cast a provisional vote which is only counted once a person's identity and their eligibility to enrol is confirmed. This will be particularly beneficial at the 2020 Territory Election due to the current, more challenging conditions and delays caused by COVID-19 for NTEC staff to visit remote communities to conduct enrolment and education programs.

There is no electronic voting system that the Australian Centre for Cyber Security has approved to replace traditional voting methods. Therefore, electronic voting is not an option at the 2020 Territory Election.

6.1. Early voting

Early voting is conducted within the two week period prior to election day at specified early voting centres (EVCs). EVCs are established in the greater Darwin region, Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek, and Nhulunbuy. The NTEC considers early voting as one of the preferred options for Territory voters, as the use of this service will reduce the number of people gathering at voting centres on election day.

Amendments to the Act in 2016 removed any restriction on electors voting before election day. They allow electors to opt for ‘convenience voting’ at EVCs during the two weeks prior to election day. After the changes, there was an increase of 175.9% of voters opting to use the early voting option in the 2016 NT Legislative Assembly general election (2016 Territory Election), accounting for 36.0% of total ballot papers. It is expected that more voters will this year choose to vote early, also encouraged by a campaign recommending voters use this service.

Additional EVCs will be established close to high foot traffic areas such as shopping centres and supermarkets. In general, it is considered that most voters in regional centres shop regularly at supermarkets and can therefore use early voting services without the need to make an extra outing. EVCs are now open on Saturdays and Sundays instead of just weekdays.

Measures to assist in minimising the spread of COVID-19 during early voting include:

- practising social distancing
- additional cleaning of surfaces by a hygiene officer
- single use pencils
- hand sanitiser
- additional early voting centres in the Greater Darwin region and Alice Springs
- additional operating hours for early voting centres to include Saturday and Sunday
- a campaign encouraging electors to use early voting as a preferred method of voting
- a campaign encouraging electors to practise social distancing while voting
- Information material to remind electors to maintain social distancing and leave the venue if they are unwell.

Information on how early voting will operate to comply with advice to prevent the spread of COVID-19, will shortly be available on the NTEC website.
6.2. Postal voting

Applications for postal voting opened 1 January 2020, and all electors are entitled to use it.

Postal votes must be returned by 12:00 noon, on the second Friday following election day. Electors who are overseas can apply for a postal vote up until Tuesday, 18 August 2020, and if they are in Australia, Thursday, 20 August 2020. Applications can be made by phoning the NTEC, or filling out an online or printed form available on the NTEC’s website, or at the NTEC office.

There was an increase of 25.1% of postal ballot packs issued by the NTEC at the 2016 Territory Election compared with the 2012 NT Legislative Assembly general election (2012 Territory Election) following changes to the Act. These amendments removed the need for certain criteria to be met and enabled online postal vote applications.

During the two weeks before election day in 2016, 6,649 postal ballot packs were despatched, with 65.4% (4,351) of these completed, returned by deadline and accepted. It is expected the number of postal vote applications and eligible postal votes will increase at the 2020 Territory Election.

Elector wishing to use the postal voting option are encouraged to apply before the first postal dispatch on 7 August to ensure there is adequate time for them to receive the postal ballot pack, complete the vote and return it before the deadline. Early applications for postal votes will assist in addressing the challenges of a short election timetable and declining postal delivery services.

If postal vote applications are received before the first dispatch, electors will have two weeks to receive their ballots, which must be completed by 6:00pm on election day.

Voters with special needs can apply for a postal vote and use the supporting educational material to assist them in lodging an eligible vote. Educational videos in 14 languages will be available on the NTEC website.

In the event that NTEC staff cannot enter facilities that are at high risk, such as nursing homes or correctional centres to conduct mobile voting, postal voting will be the next preferred voting option.

With a likely increase in postal voting, and with the deadline for receipt of postal votes at 12:00 noon on the second Friday following election day, it is expected there will be some delays in counting the votes. A subsequent delay in counting may mean that in some electorates with a close contest, there will no official outcome until two weeks after the election.

Measures introduced to encourage electors to postal vote to assist in minimising the spread of COVID-19 include:

- a campaign encouraging electors, especially vulnerable electors, to use postal voting as a preferred method of voting
- a campaign encouraging electors to submit a postal vote application before the first postal dispatch on 7 August, 2020 to ensure there is adequate time to receive the postal ballot pack, complete the vote and return it before the deadline.

Information on postal voting is available on the NTEC website.
6.3. Mobile voting

Mobile voting requires trained NTEC staff to travel to predetermined remote locations at set times to deliver voting services. Usually, mobile voting is also conducted in hospitals, nursing homes, hostels and correctional centres. This year, detailed planning is necessary to ensure NTEC staff comply with any health guidelines or restrictions to limit the spread of COVID-19. While the delivery of an election is considered an essential service, the NTEC understands the need to carefully manage staff entering remote locations, communities and facilities at higher risk.

Specific policies and procedures will be developed for NTEC staff conducting mobile voting services, including travel to remote communities and the management of mobile voting centres. There will be a focus on ensuring NTEC staff limit contact with community members, including eliminating unnecessary interaction within the community.

At the 2016 Territory Election, the federal Department of Human Services assisted the NTEC by providing field staff to assist in the delivery of mobile voting services. The Department of Human Services has indicated that its current resources are at capacity due to responding to COVID-19 and therefore cannot assist with the 2020 Territory Election. The NTEC will instead collaborate with other NT Government agencies to identify additional staff and field officers who can assist the NTEC to deliver mobile voting to remote locations.

The NTEC will assess indoor mobile voting locations to determine whether they remain appropriate and can comply with social distancing requirements. If another suitable indoor location cannot be sourced, outdoor sites will be identified. Outdoor sites are often used in remote locations that do not have suitable infrastructure.

The NTEC has traditionally provided mobile voting services for vulnerable Territorians in high risk facilities, including hospitals, nursing homes, hostels and correctional centres. It is the NTEC’s preferred option at these facilities and its convenience results in a strong uptake. However, the NTEC will seek and adhere to the advice of government staff closer to election day as to whether it is considered safe and appropriate for NTEC staff to visit high risk facilities.

If it is considered safe and appropriate, the NTEC will adhere to the appropriate measures and take all necessary precautions to limit the risk of spread of COVID-19. If official advice is to cancel mobile voting at high risk facilities, electors in these facilities will be encouraged to apply for a postal vote.

In the event that mobile voting can take place at a hospital, the NTEC will take precautionary measures and offer a stationary service instead of the traditional bedside service. This will assist in reducing the risk of NTEC staff spreading or contracting COVID-19.

Eligible voters in correctional facilities (prisoners serving a sentence of three years or less) will automatically be registered for a postal vote, in the event that mobile voting does not occur. Correctional Services has also agreed to assist in ensuring eligible prisoners are correctly enrolled.

Provisional voting will allow electors who are entitled to enrol, and who are not on the electoral roll at the close of rolls, to still enrol and vote at a mobile voting service. A provisional vote is only counted once a person’s identity and their eligibility to enrol is confirmed. This will be particularly beneficial at remote locations where mobile voting is to occur, with the more challenging conditions for NTEC staff to conduct enrolment and education programs.

Once approvals for access to remote locations for NTEC staff are obtained, the face-to-face enrolment and education program will commence.
Remote electors, who have provided their email and mobile numbers when they enrolled, will receive an SMS message and email advising of mobile voting details two days before voting is available in their communities.

Changes and measures introduced to assist in minimising the spread of COVID-19 at mobile voting locations include:

- practising social distancing
- additional cleaning of surfaces by a hygiene officer
- single use pencils
- use of hand sanitiser
- information to remind electors to socially distance and leave the venue if they are unwell
- a campaign encouraging electors to practice social distancing while voting
- procedures for NTEC staff travelling to remote locations to minimise their contact with the community members
- assessing all indoor mobile voting locations to determine their suitability to comply with social distancing, and introducing more outdoor mobile voting sites, where suitable indoor locations cannot be sourced

Information on how mobile voting will operate to comply with advice to prevent the spread of COVID-19 will shortly be available on the NTEC website.

6.4. Election day voting

Election day voting takes place between 8:00am and 6:00pm in urban and regional centres. In 2016, 40 election day voting centres were established in urban and regional areas throughout the Northern Territory. It is expected there will be a similar number of election day voting centres at the 2020 Territory Election with no plans to change the number in response to COVID-19.

The NTEC is currently assessing all election day voting centres to determine their suitability for managing the recommended social distancing protocols of 4 square metres per person. If there are some facilities identified as being not suitable, an alternative facility will be sourced, generally a school or community hall.

At the 2016 Territory Election, a total of 34,683 ordinary ballot papers were issued (34.6% of the total votes counted), a decrease of 23,925 compared to the 2012 Territory Election.

It is expected the voter turnout on election day will further decrease at the 2020 Territory Election due to the growing preference of electors to vote early and the campaign to encourage electors to cast early or postal votes. This would decrease the number of electors attending election day voting centres, limiting the number people gathering at one location and reducing queuing, making it more likely that voters will comply with social distancing requirements.

The NTEC will engage members of the Compliance Team from DOH to assist with ensuring electors adhere to social distancing requirements.

There remains a strong desire by some electors to use the traditional method of voting on election day at a voting centre. There are no considerations at this time to eliminate election day voting as an option.

There are also no plans to extend the operating hours of election day voting centres in response to COVID-19. The Act states voting on election day can only occur between 8:00am and 6:00pm.
Changes and measures introduced to assist in minimising the spread of COVID-19 at election day voting centres include:

- practising social distancing
- additional cleaning of surfaces by a hygiene officer
- single use pencils
- use of hand sanitiser
- a campaign encouraging electors to practise social distancing while voting
- information to remind electors to socially distance and leave the venue if they are unwell
- Compliance Team members from DOH to ensure electors adhere to social distancing requirements.
- assessing all election day voting centres to determine their suitability for social distancing

Information on how election day voting centres will operate to comply with advice to prevent the spread of COVID-19, will shortly be available on the NTEC website.

7. Vulnerable people, voters with special needs and high risk locations

Special consideration and planning will occur to ensure that vulnerable people, those with special needs or residing at high-risk locations can vote at the 2020 Territory Election.

7.1. Vulnerable or people at high risk

Vulnerable people are those who are considered at high risk of contracting COVID-19. For example, elderly Territorians or those with pre-existing respiratory or immunity issues. Vulnerable or high-risk electors can apply to receive a postal vote up until Thursday, 20 August 2020 for forwarding addresses within Australia. Postal vote applications are now open and can be made by phoning the NTEC, or filling out an online or printed form available on the NTEC’s website or at the NTEC office.

Elector wishing to use the postal voting option are encouraged to submit an application before the first postal dispatch on 7 August 2020 to ensure there is adequate time for them to receive the postal ballot pack, complete the vote and return it before the deadline.

An education campaign will be run to encourage high risk electors to utilise postal voting.

Elector in quarantine due to COVID-19 who are unable to attend a voting centre should apply for a postal vote.

7.2. Voters with special needs

Physical incapacity, caring responsibilities, language barriers, remoteness and other circumstances can impact on an elector’s ability to vote. The NTEC provides a range of support for voters with special needs and NTEC staff are trained to provide assistance when needed.

Services which will continue to be provided to voters with special needs are:

- early and postal voting available to all electors
- postal vote applications can be lodged online or by call centre staff
- more than 30 early and election day voting centres will offer full or assisted wheelchair access and, where possible, parking facilities for people with a disability. Access details will be advertised in print and on the NTEC website
- local assistants who are bi-lingual employed to interpret at mobile and election day voting centres
• NTEC staff providing personal assistance to vote to facilitate electors unable to make their mark on the ballot paper, or, if voting by post, assistance from family member, carer or friend
• Tablets are allocated for all voting centres and mobile voting locations, containing information on how to vote in 14 languages.

Also available to electors with special needs is the ability to vote from their cars on election day. This service is strictly available to voters with special needs, such as those with physical incapacity, and where an NTEC staff can assist with the process.

7.3. High risk locations

The NTEC has traditionally provided mobile voting services for vulnerable Territorians in high risk facilities, including hospitals, nursing homes, hostels and correctional centres. Mobile voting at these facilities is the NTEC’s preferred option due to a strong uptake. However, the NTEC will seek and adhere to the advice of government staff as to whether it is considered safe and appropriate for NTEC staff to visit high risk facilities to conduct mobile voting.

If it is considered safe and appropriate, the NTEC will adhere to the appropriate measures and take all necessary precautions to limit the spread of COVID-19. In the event that official advice is to cancel mobile voting at high-risk facilities, electors in these facilities will be encouraged to use postal voting. Educational resources will be made available to voters in these facilities to assist them with completing an eligible vote. Educational videos in 14 languages will be available on the NTEC website.

If mobile voting cannot occur, eligible voters in correctional facilities (prisoners serving a sentence of three years or less) will be registered for postal voting.

8. Awareness and education

There will be an education and awareness campaign developed to inform voters of the changes for the 2020 Territory Election in response to COVID-19.

The NTEC will continue its awareness and education program across media platforms including radio, television, print and social media.

The 2020 Territory Election awareness campaign will run in three phases:

1. Encouraging eligible voters to enrol to vote and update their details on the electoral roll.
2. Encouraging eligible voters to enrol to vote and update their details on the electoral roll before the imminent deadline of 5:00pm on Friday, 31 July.
3. Informing electors of voting details, including changes to voting as a result of COVID-19.

The campaign will encourage electors to vote at an early voting centre or apply for a postal vote early, the two preferred methods, to limit the number of people attending a voting centre on election day, and therefore reducing a crowd and the risk of spreading COVID-19.

The campaign will also target vulnerable people, those with special needs or who are at high-risk locations.

A key message for electors is to not attend a voting centre if they feel unwell and are showing COVID-19 symptoms. Education material with this message will be displayed at voting centres.
9. Management of NTEC staff

The safety of NTEC staff is paramount and there will be an increased effort to protect staff from contracting and spreading COVID-19.

More than 400 positions will be filled to deliver the 2020 Territory Election. The NTEC has already contacted its large pool of casual workers to check they are able to carry out their duties within a COVID-19 environment.

A protocol will be developed for suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 by NTEC staff to ensure there are correct procedures in place to manage the risk of spreading the virus and keep staff and electors safe.

Online training is mandatory for all voting centre staff and face-to-face training is conducted for senior positions. This provides the NTEC with the opportunity to identify and target the areas needing further emphasis:

- hygiene and social distancing measures
- cleaning protocols
- a strict direction and protocol for suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19

Local assistants employed in remote communities will be briefed face-to-face about how they can assist in the above target areas and how to address COVID-19 related concerns from electors.

10. Candidates and campaigners

It is the responsibility of candidates and campaigners to comply with COVID-19 measures. This includes for practicing physical distancing, complying with directions relation to health requirements, and not attending a voting centre or campaign if they feel unwell.

The physical distancing measures provided by DOH will mean there will likely need to be changes to the presence and role of scrutineers in counting and scrutiny centres. The NTEC is developing a workable solution which focuses on keeping NTEC staff, electors, and candidates and campaigners safe and meeting the needs of candidates and campaigners.

Candidates and campaigners travelling to remote locations for mobile voting are encouraged to complete a pre-departure risk assessment, a document to be developed.

11. Vote counting

Following the close of voting at 6:00pm on Saturday, 22 August 2020, ballot paper counts will take place at all election day voting centres. Other counts of early, postal and mobile voting ballot papers will be undertaken at scrutiny centres in Darwin and Alice Springs. Planning is underway to determine how the counting of votes can occur while complying with social distancing measures.

A fresh count of all ballot papers will be conducted at the Darwin and Alice Springs scrutiny centres from the Monday after election day. Absent, declaration and further postal vote counts will also commence on the Monday, with progressive updates made via the NTEC website.
11.1. Changes to counting protocols

The NTEC recognises it will be required to balance the delivery of the election in a transparent manner within the restrictions and advice provided at the time relating to COVID-19. The NTEC will need to consider the safety of NTEC staff and the ability to apply hygiene practices and social distancing while they perform their roles.

The Act allows one scrutineer per candidate at a vote count. It is recognised that the traditional model of counting in election day voting centres and scrutiny centres does not comply with social distancing requirements and will need to be reviewed.

The NTEC will liaise with political parties to work through how a suitable model can be developed which can comply with social distancing requirements. At the recent Queensland local government elections held Saturday, 28 March 2020, scrutineers were excluded from voting centres and scrutiny centres due to an inability to meet social distancing requirements. While this is not the preferred approach of the NTEC, considerations will need to occur to ensure social distancing requirements can be adhered to in a sensible and workable manner. This will need to take into account the planning and review of premises sizes which is currently underway.

11.2. Timeliness of results

An expected increase of postal votes will result in a larger portion of votes being received by the NTEC after election day. Postal votes must be received by 12:00 noon, on the second Friday following Election Day.

Postal votes received by the NTEC by election day will be counted at a counting centre after 6:00pm on election day. The process to count postal votes is longer than counting early or election day votes due to the need to extract the vote from the envelope and sort into divisions. An increase in the receipt of postal votes at the 2016 Territory Election resulted in a longer vote count process on election day. It is likely a lengthier election day vote count will again occur at the 2020 Territory Election with more electors opting to lodge a postal vote.

While it would be beneficial for timing to allow the NTEC to open and unfold (not count) postal votes prior to 6:00pm on election day, this action is prohibited by the current legislation which only allows counting of votes to take place after 6:00pm on election day.

Postal votes received after election day will be counted up until 12:00 noon on the second Friday following election day. Postal votes will be counted regularly throughout the two week period following election day, particularly in divisions with close vote counts. However, the up to two week delay for postal votes to be counted may mean that in some or more electorates with a close vote contest, there will be no official election outcome until two weeks after election day.

Details for how the NTEC will accommodate staff and scrutineers in counting centres is yet to be confirmed. The requirement to practice social distancing will bring challenges and complexities for the operation of counting centres, despite the NTEC securing a larger facility for the 2020 Territory Election. Depending on the model chosen, it may result in delays to counting votes on election day. Candidates and political parties will be consulted in the development of a practical and suitable model for scrutineering at counting centres.