

Part E – Verifying and counting the votes

UK Parliamentary general election in
Great Britain on 7 May 2015: guidance
for (Acting) Returning Officers

In this guidance we use 'must' when we refer to a specific legal requirement. We use 'should' for items we consider to be recommended practice, but which are not legal requirements.

Translations and other formats

For information on obtaining this publication in another language or in a large-print or Braille version please contact the Electoral Commission:

Tel: 020 7271 0500

Email: publications@electoralcommission.org.uk

Contents

1	Principles for an effective verification and count	1
2	Preparing for the verification and count.....	2
	Planning for the verification and count.....	2
	Timing of the verification and count.....	3
	Staffing and training.....	4
	Equipment and layout at the verification and count venue	4
	Managing attendees	6
	Communicating during the verification and count.....	5
	Ensuring the security of ballot papers.....	6
3	Attendance at the verification and count.....	8
	Who can attend?	8
	Controlling admission	9
	Counting agents	9
	Accredited observers.....	9
	Commission representatives	10
	The media	10
4	Receipt of polling station materials and sealed boxes of postal ballot papers.....	11
	Receipt of sealed boxes of postal ballot papers	12
5	Verification	13
6	The count.....	16
	Counting the votes.....	16
	What if you are not able to start the count within four hours of the close of poll?	20
	Mixing.....	16
	Sorting and counting.....	16
	Doubtful ballot papers.....	17
	Reconciliation	18
	Provisional result and recounts	20
	Equality of votes	21
	Declaring the results.....	22

1 Principles for an effective verification and count

1.1 You should ensure that your verification and count arrangements can deliver the key principles for an effective verification and count, which are as follows:

- All processes are transparent, with a clear and unambiguous audit trail.
- The verification produces an accurate result. This means that the number of ballot papers in each box either matches the number of ballot papers issued as stated on the ballot paper account or, if it does not:
 - the source of the variance has been identified and can be explained, and/or
 - the box has been recounted at least twice, until the same number of ballot papers is counted on two consecutive occasions.
 - The count produces an accurate result, where the total number of votes cast for each candidate and rejected votes matches the total number of ballot papers given on the verification statement for the constituency
- The verification and count are timely.
- The secrecy of the vote is maintained at all times.
- The security of ballot papers and other stationery is maintained at all times

1.2 In addition to considering how to ensure that your processes will enable you to meet the key principles, you will need to consider other relevant practical factors that will affect the organisation and timing of the verification and count, such as:

- the geography of the constituency
- the size of the constituency
- size and capacity of your venue
- cost
- transparency for candidates and agents

2 Preparing for the verification and count

2.1 This chapter covers the general considerations you will need to make when preparing for the verification and count in your area.



This guidance should be read alongside our verification and count resource '[Planning for an effective verification and count: a toolkit for \(Acting\) Returning Officers at the May 2015 polls](#)', which covers the more practical aspects of running the verification and count, as well as the decisions you will need to make on how best to manage these processes.

We recognise that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach which can be applied to running the verification and count process at an election. Every electoral area has its own set of local circumstances that will influence the decisions that you must make in running the verification and count processes. The toolkit we have developed has been designed to ensure consistency of outcomes, following the principles set out in Chapter 1, while providing flexibility in recognition of varying local circumstances.

Planning for the verification and count

2.2 As set out in [Part B – Planning and Organisation](#), to plan effectively for the election, you should prepare a project plan that is treated as a 'living document', keeping it under regular review, and using it to monitor progress.

2.3 You should keep your plan for the resourcing and delivery of the verification and count under review, taking into account the particular context of the election, particularly given that many constituencies are likely to see very closely fought contests. You should review your assumptions to ensure they continue to be realistic and robust, including your assumptions on turnout, the number of candidates, speed and capability of count staff and expected timing for completing the various count stages. Such a review will help inform a realistic assessment of whether you will be able to deliver the overall plan for the count, and whether and when it may be necessary to implement contingency plans. In all cases your plan should be flexible enough to allow you to respond if any of your assumptions change, covering what contingency actions you will take in such circumstances.

2.4 To help build confidence in your plan for the verification and count, you should, as a minimum, share information on your plan with local political parties, elected representatives and prospective candidates. To help manage expectations you should also identify in advance those decisions about the management of the count that must be taken in consultation and agreement with candidates and agents, and make clear to them on what basis you will be making decisions. This includes, for example, decisions on re-counts and the

suspension of the count. While you should seek input from those affected or interested to inform your decision-making, ultimately the responsibility for making decisions remains with you as (A)RO.

2.5 The following sections in this chapter set out the legal requirements and provide general guidance on:

- the timing of the verification and count
- staffing and training
- equipment and layout of venues
- managing attendees
- communicating during the verification and count
- security of ballot papers

Timing of the verification and count

2.6 Our [timing of election counts report](#) sets out the overarching principle that should underpin decision-making in relation to the timing of election counts, that is, the need to ensure an accurate result in which voters, candidates and political parties have confidence. Legislation specific to each election will determine how much scope you have in deciding the timing of the count.

2.7 As (A)RO, the scope of your decision about the timing of the count is prescribed. You are required to make arrangements for the verification and counting of the votes at the election as soon as practicable after the close of poll. The legislation also specifies that you must take reasonable steps to begin counting the votes as soon as practicable and within four hours of the close of poll. This duty relates to the actual counting of the votes and not to the verification process. Guidance on what you need to do if you do not commence the count within four hours of the close of poll is provided in **Chapter 6 - The count**.

2.8 There will be an expectation among candidates, parties and the media that the results will be declared as soon as possible after the close of poll at 10pm on 7 May 2015¹. (A)ROs will therefore need to plan carefully how to manage the expectations of candidates, parties and the media.

2.9 The period of time specified for the count to take place must be such that you can resource and conduct a well-run count process within it, ensuring an accurate result in which voters, candidates and agents can have confidence. You will need to take this into account when identifying the options for the timing of the verification and counting of the votes.

¹ The fact that there may be voters waiting in a queue to cast their vote does not alter the fact that close of poll continues to be 10pm.

2.10 Your plan should also identify key points during the count process at which you will review progress against the expected schedule for declaring the result. This progress review should be used to keep candidates and agents informed of progress at the count.

Staffing and training

2.11 In order to ensure that voters can have confidence that their vote will be counted in the way they intended, you will need to put in place appropriate resources to ensure the verification and count are timely.



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standard 1](#), you will need to put in place appropriate resources to ensure the verification and count are timely.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be met you will need to set out how the verification and count is to be organised and managed, including the process you followed to arrive at your decision.



Further guidance on staffing the verification and count and the training of verification and count staff can be found in [Part B – Planning and organisation](#).

Layout and equipment at the verification and count venue

2.12 Layout plans of your verification and count venue should also be prepared. A good layout will be informed by the verification and count model you decide to adopt, consideration of the workflows you intend to follow and the space you will have available.

2.13 So that those attending the count can have confidence that the count process is well-managed and can have confidence in the result, you will need to ensure that all your processes are transparent, with everything at the verification and count carried out in clear view of all those entitled to attend.

2.14 You should ensure that all equipment is tested in advance of the verification and count and you have contingency arrangements in place in case of equipment or power malfunction.



Further guidance on selecting verification and count venues can be found in [Part B – Planning and organisation](#). For practical guidance on how to lay out your verification and count venue(s) and a checklist of useful materials, see our verification and count resource '[Planning for an effective verification and count: a toolkit for \(Acting\) Returning Officers at the May 2015 polls](#)'.



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standard 2](#), you will need to ensure count processes are transparent, with everything at the verification and count carried out in clear view of all those entitled to attend, with information provided to attendees on the processes to be followed.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be delivered you will need to have in place a layout plan of the count and have in place information to be provided to attendees at the count.

Communicating during the verification and count

2.15 Good communication, both at candidate and agent briefings in advance of the count and at the event itself, allows those present to properly scrutinise all of the processes and will help to build confidence in the administration of the verification and count. Providing information on the process can also help to lower the number of queries raised by candidates and agents – in particular from new or inexperienced candidates – thus reducing the pressure on staff.

2.16 Using a public address system to make announcements about what is happening where and when throughout the verification and count processes will help keep candidates and agents informed and alert them to any particular processes at which their attendance is required (e.g. at the adjudication of doubtful ballot papers).

2.17 To ensure transparency of communication between counting staff and other attendees at the count (including counting agents) you should make clear in instructions to those attending the count that any questions should be communicated via count supervisors rather than counting assistants.

2.18 Also, if agents or observers are dissatisfied in any way with the manner in which the proceedings are being carried out, the opportunity should always be available for them to make direct representations to you at the earliest opportunity so that any concerns may be considered, explanations and reassurances given, and any corrective action taken if necessary.



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standard 2](#), you will need to ensure that count processes are transparent, with everything at the verification and count carried out in clear view of all those entitled to attend, with information provided to attendees on the processes to be followed.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be delivered you will need to have a layout plan of the count and have in place information to be provided to attendees at the count and arrangements to communicate progress at the count.

2.19 You should consider the following when determining what information you will provide to anyone attending the verification and count on the processes to be followed, and how you will provide it:

- Placing information posters and boards throughout the verification and count venue, which show the key members of staff and provide an overview of the procedures to be followed in order to help attendees identify what is happening and where. You may wish to provide pictures of yourself and your key staff to help attendees identify you at the count. This information could also be provided in advance of the count, for example as part of an information booklet.
- Providing a layout plan of the venue, indicating the key areas of interest for counting agents and observers.
- Appointing a member of staff to respond to queries and to act as liaison between candidates, agents, observers and key staff.
- Providing a hand-out listing all ballot box numbers and the names of the polling stations they relate to.
- Providing a copy of the template verification and count paperwork that will be used to communicate the outcome of the verification and count, with an indication of the level at which the information will be provided (e.g. ward level / polling district level) – to be followed by provision of the actual verification statement and statement of result.

2.20 You should distribute an information pack to everyone attending the count.



For practical guidance on communicating information at the verification and count venue, see our verification and count resource [‘Planning for an effective verification and count: a toolkit for \(Acting\) Returning Officers at the May 2015 polls’](#).

Managing attendees

2.21 Your plans should include mechanisms for managing the expectations of those attending the verification and count, so all attendees know what to expect and what their role is. They should also cover how you will maintain the secrecy of the vote throughout the verification and count.

2.22 You should ensure that all attendees at the count, including candidates, their guests, election agents, counting agents and the media, are briefed on and fully understand the process for conducting the count and the standards of behaviour which are expected of them at all times. You should make clear in both written and face-to-face briefings for attendees that you will be excluding attendees from the count venue if their behaviour interferes with the effective conduct of the count. This should help count staff to carry out verification and count activities without interference from counting agents and other observers.

2.23 You should also decide on a policy for the use of mobile phones in the verification and count venue.

2.24 Tickets or entrance passes should be issued to everyone entitled to attend the count, except accredited observers and Commission representatives who will be wearing pink or silver accreditation badges. You should give consideration to issuing different-coloured tickets or passes to identify the different categories of attendees.

2.25 You should liaise with the Police to check that their plans for managing the public space outside the count venue will enable people entitled to attend the count to enter and leave the venue freely and without obstruction.



See **Chapter 3 – Attendance at the verification and count** for further guidance on who is entitled to attend the verification and count.

Ensuring the security of ballot papers



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standard 1](#), you will need to maintain the secure storage of ballot papers at all times.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be delivered you will need to have in place arrangements for securely storing ballot papers.

2.26 You should take all necessary steps to ensure the security of ballot papers and relevant stationery from close of poll through to the declaration of the results, particularly where ballot papers need to be transported from the verification to the count or where a break in proceedings will require the ballots to be stored between the conclusion of the verification and the commencement of the count.

2.27 You should ensure the security of the ballot papers at all times. If you need to store ballot papers, you should store them in sealed ballot boxes in a secure place, allowing agents to attach their seals to the ballot boxes. You should always open the sealed ballot boxes in clear view of any candidates and agents present, so they can satisfy themselves that nobody has interfered with the ballot papers and the ballot boxes.

2.28 You should consider liaising with your local police Single Point of Contact (SPOC) when deciding on the most appropriate method for ensuring secure storage.

2.29 You should also brief candidates and agents about your arrangements, so that they can have confidence in the integrity of the count.



For practical information on ensuring the security of ballot boxes and ballot papers see our verification and count resource '[Planning for an effective verification and count: a toolkit for \(Acting\) Returning Officers at the May 2015 polls](#)'.

3 Attendance at the verification and count



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standard 2](#), you will need to ensure count processes are transparent, with everything at the verification and count carried out in clear view of all those entitled to attend, with information provided to attendees on the processes to be followed.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be delivered you will need to have a layout plan of the count, and have in place information to be provided to attendees at the count and arrangements to communicate progress at the count.

Who can attend?

3.1 The following people are entitled by law to attend the verification and count:

- you and your staff
- candidates
- one guest per candidate
- election agents (or a sub-agent on their behalf)
- counting agents
- Commission representatives
- accredited observers
- any other person permitted by you, as (Acting) Returning Officer, to attend (see paragraph **3.5** below)

3.2 You have a legal duty to give counting agents reasonable facilities for overseeing the verification and counting of the votes. You should also ensure that anyone else who is entitled to attend has an unrestricted view of the proceedings, while also ensuring that they will not be able to interfere with the work of your staff.

3.3 You should take all necessary steps to ensure that anyone attending does not interfere with or compromise the secrecy of the vote. You are legally required to make such arrangements as you think fit to ensure that all attendees are provided with a copy of the relevant secrecy requirements.

3.4 There is no requirement for those attending to arrive by a certain time, and so those entitled to attend should be admitted whenever they arrive. Also, a procedure should be in place so that any attendee who wishes to leave and return later is not prevented from doing so.

3.5 The legislation provides that you can, at your discretion, permit other people to attend the proceedings if you are satisfied that it will not impede the verification or efficient counting of votes and you have either consulted the election agents or thought it impracticable to do so.

Controlling admission

3.6 You should provide lists of those persons entitled to attend at the entrance to the verification and count, and instruct security staff to check the tickets or passes of anyone seeking to attend. However, security staff should also be briefed that Commission representatives and accredited observers do not need to provide advance notification of where they intend to observe and therefore may not appear on their list but are nevertheless entitled to access the verification and count venue on production of their observer or Commission representative identification badge.

3.7 You should, for health, safety and security reasons, record the names of everyone who actually attends the verification and count.



Further guidance on accredited observers and Commission representatives, including a quick guide to the observer badge types, can be found in [Part B – Planning and organisation](#).

Counting agents



Guidance on the appointment of counting agents can be found in [Part C – Administering the poll](#).

3.8 You have a legal duty to give counting agents reasonable facilities for overseeing the verification and counting of the votes, and to provide them with relevant information. In particular, the law requires that where votes are counted by sorting the ballot papers according to candidate and then counting each set of ballot papers, the counting agents are entitled to satisfy themselves that the ballot papers are correctly sorted.

Accredited observers

3.9 Legislation allows you to limit the number of observers who may be present at any one time during the verification and count. However, you should use caution in doing so. Electoral observation is a legitimate and valuable part of the electoral process, and care should be taken not to hinder or obstruct the conduct of any observations. You are not entitled to bar all observers from the verification and count, only to limit the number of

observers present at any one time, and this discretion should be exercised reasonably.

3.10 You must have regard to the [Commission's Code of practice for observers](#) when managing the attendance of observers.



Further guidance on accredited observers can be found in [Part B – Planning and organisation](#).

Commission representatives

3.11 Commission representatives are also entitled to attend the verification and count and to observe your working practices. They can ask questions of your staff and of agents, but will not do so if this would obstruct or disturb the conduct of proceedings. You are not allowed to limit the number of Commission representatives at the verification and count.

The media

3.12 You should include space and opportunity for the media to report on the result of the election. You have discretion to decide which representatives of the media you allow to attend. As with all attendees, you must ensure that media representatives do not interfere with the process or compromise the secrecy of the vote.

3.13 You should ensure that your public relations team are present to deal with media enquiries. You should make sure that they know who to approach if they are asked any technical electoral questions.

3.14 In addition to making practical arrangements for their attendance, any early contact with the media should also include an explanation of the processes to be followed and the expected finish and declaration times for each poll.

3.15 If media representatives are accredited by the Commission as observers and are attending in such a capacity, they have the same rights and obligations as any other accredited observer. Like any other observers, they are required to have regard to the [Commission's Code of practice for observers](#) and must abide by any decision that you make on the use of cameras and other recording equipment.



For practical guidance on liaising with the media, see our verification and count resource '[Planning for an effective verification and count: a toolkit for \(Acting\) Returning Officers at the May 2015 polls](#)'.

4 Receipt of polling station materials and sealed boxes of postal ballot papers



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standards 1 and 2](#), you will need to ensure count processes are designed and managed to secure an accurate result, with a clear audit trail.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be delivered you will need to have in place arrangements to maintain a clear audit trail of the count processes.

4.1 In preparation, you should produce templates of all documents which will be completed at the verification and count to provide a clear audit trail. We have produced template forms to support (A)ROs in developing a clear audit trail of the verification and count processes. Further guidance on maintaining a clear audit trail of the count processes can be found throughout this part, in **Chapter 5 - Verification** and in **Chapter 6 - The count**

4.2 The correct and orderly receipt of ballot boxes and materials from polling stations is a key component of an accurate verification process. Your team of staff receiving materials from polling stations should use a checklist to ensure that all ballot boxes and ballot paper accounts are accurately accounted for, as well as any packets containing postal votes handed in at polling stations.

4.3 Where Presiding Officers are required to transport the ballot boxes to the verification and count venue, it should be made clear to the staff receiving the ballot boxes that no Presiding Officer should be allowed to leave until their ballot box(es) and all of the documents and packets have been received and checked off by the designated staff member and, wherever possible, a cursory check of the ballot paper account has been made. Staff receiving ballot boxes should be instructed to ensure that they have the ballot paper account for each ballot box.

4.4 Following receipt, the ballot paper accounts can be taken to the staff dealing with the management of the ballot box verification process and all of the materials received back from polling stations can be released by receiving staff to the relevant teams, which allows the process of the verification of the unused ballot papers and the opening of postal votes to commence.

4.5 The sacks containing the documents that need to be stored, such as sealed corresponding number lists, should be separated from those containing items that will be reused, such as general stationery items. The packets and parcels from polling stations should be organised in such a way as to enable easy location of any packet.

4.6 All packets of spoiled and unused ballot papers must be opened and counted and then resealed, with the numbers counted supplied to those staff members responsible for the verification process. You are prohibited from opening the sealed packets of tendered ballot papers, but you must open and then reseal the packet containing the tendered votes list.

4.7 You are not permitted to open the sealed packets containing the corresponding number lists and certificates of employment, the marked copies of the register and the lists of proxies. You should ensure that the materials that you must keep sealed are placed in a designated and secure area for the duration of the verification and count.

Receipt of sealed boxes of postal ballot papers

4.8 Postal ballot papers previously received and opened will have been processed and should be brought to the verification and count venue in sealed ballot boxes, with an accompanying ballot paper account for each postal ballot box. Staff receiving the postal ballot boxes should use a checklist to ensure that all postal ballot boxes and postal ballot paper accounts are accurately accounted for.

4.9 All packets and ballot boxes containing postal ballot papers must be subject to verification in the same way as any ballot box from a polling station. As these will often be some of the first boxes being verified, they present an opportunity to create confidence in the process and in the count as a whole.

5 Verification

5.1 Verification has two main purposes – to ensure and demonstrate that all ballot papers issued at polling stations and all returned postal ballot papers have been brought to the count, and to provide the figure with which the count outcome must reconcile. You should keep both purposes in mind when conducting the verification process.

5.2 The training of Presiding Officers in the completion of ballot paper accounts, coupled with ballot paper accounts produced in a clear, easy-to-complete format, should help to provide a firm foundation for the verification process.



Information on the training of polling station staff is provided in [Part B – Planning and organisation](#).

5.3 The verification of the used, unused and spoilt ballot papers is a legal requirement, and is central to the declaration of accurate results.

5.4 You have a legal duty to verify each ballot paper account and to draw up a statement as to the result of the verification. This is a record of the number of ballot papers expected and the number of ballot papers counted, along with an explanation for any variances. Any agent may make a copy of this, and you should make available copies of this for the agents present once verification has been completed. The verification statement is a key communication tool that will help to ensure that candidates and agents are confident that the processes at the verification and count are transparent and that they will produce an accurate result.

5.5 As with all aspects of the verification and count process, transparency is key and the process followed should be clear to all present.

5.6 The key stages of the verification process are as follows:

- a. Staff must open the packets of unused ballot papers and ascertain the number of ballot papers that were not issued by noting the number of books and number of ballot papers remaining in any part book of ballot papers inside the packet. The packets of spoilt ballot papers must also be opened and counted. Both unused and spoilt ballot papers must be resealed after they have been counted.
- b. Staff must open the ballot boxes in the presence of any counting agents and observers that are present. When a box has had a seal attached by an agent at the close of the poll, particular care should be taken to show to any agents and observers present that this seal is still intact prior to it being broken. The ballot papers should be carefully tipped onto the table, ensuring that none have fallen onto

the floor and that the box is empty.

- c. You have a legal duty to keep the ballot papers face up at all times during the verification and count.
- d. You should show the empty box to the agents and observers so that they can be satisfied that it is indeed empty. The counting assistants should then unfold the ballot papers and count them into bundles. Accuracy at this stage is vital, so bundles should be passed to another assistant for rechecking. Any tendered ballot papers that have been mistakenly placed in the ballot box during the day should be removed and handed to the supervisor.
- e. The totals given on the ballot paper account must be compared against the number of ballot papers counted and recorded as being present inside the ballot box. You must compare the unused and spoiled ballot papers, as well as the tendered votes list, against the figures on each ballot paper account. The total number of ballot papers in the ballot box should agree with the total on the ballot paper account, and reconcile with the total number of unused ballot papers.

5.7 If a ballot paper account does not reconcile, you should undertake the following procedure and document the outcome on the verification statement.

- a. Make a full check of the arithmetic on the ballot paper account and the number of unused ballot papers. Check the other packets of returned materials and any polling station logbook to try to identify any reason for missing or additional ballot papers. Ensure that returned postal ballots have not been added to the number of votes cast in the polling station. You should consider contacting the Presiding Officer to ask them to try to explain any discrepancies.
- b. Check the record of issued ballot boxes to see if more than one ballot box was issued to the polling station and ensure that all boxes allocated to the station are opened and accounted for.
- c. Check the ballot boxes for all electoral events for all polling stations within the same polling place. The verification of the ballot paper accounts for the other polling stations within that location may indicate a compensating error due to electors placing their ballot paper in the 'wrong' box or in a box from the wrong polling station. If the compensating errors all balance, the verification can be deemed to have been successful.
- d. If the ballot box is from a single polling station or if there is no compensating error in the figures from the other polling station(s) in that polling place, recount the ballot papers in the box at least twice or until the same figure is achieved on two consecutive occasions.
- e. If, after following the procedures outlined above, any discrepancy

still remains, use the number of ballot papers counted and recounted by the count staff as the verified figure and make an appropriate note on the ballot paper account.

- f. Add the verified total and the variance between that and the number on the ballot paper account to the statement as to the result of the verification, if possible with an explanation of why that variance has occurred, and discuss this with any agents and observers present.

5.8 Verification can only be completed once all postal ballot papers, including those received at polling stations, have been opened and processed, and have been through the verification process.

5.9 You must ensure that the verification statement containing the result of the verification of each ballot box is completed. The statement must in each case include the total number of postal ballot papers and the total number of ballot papers verified for the poll. You should sign the statements. Any agent may make a copy of the statement as to the result of the verification and, to promote confidence in the result, you should make copies available for the agents present once verification has been completed.

5.10 If, on completion of verification, you do not proceed immediately to the counting of the votes, you should place the ballot papers and other documents in secure packets under your own seal and the seals of any agents present who wish to affix their own seals.

5.11 You should take all necessary steps to ensure the security of the ballot papers and the relevant stationery during any break in the verification and count proceedings. Further guidance on ensuring the security of ballot boxes can be found in paragraph **2.26** above and our verification and count resource [‘Planning for an effective verification and count: a toolkit for \(Acting\) Returning Officers at the May 2015 polls’](#).

6 The count

Counting the votes

6.1 You must have taken reasonable steps to begin counting the votes as soon as practicable within four hours of the close of poll. The fact that there may be voters waiting in a queue to cast their vote does not alter the fact that close of poll continues to be 10pm. This means that you will need to have taken all reasonable steps to start the count by 2am, even if voters are waiting in a queue at 10pm.

6.2 All boxes should be opened in full view of any agents that are present. When a box has had a seal attached by an agent, particular care should be taken to show to any agents present that this seal is still intact prior to it being broken.

6.3 You should also provide appropriate opportunities for those who are entitled to observe and to object to doubtful ballot paper adjudication decisions. This should include ensuring that bundles of counted ballot papers are stored in full sight of counting agents in a way which allows them to monitor progress throughout the count.

Mixing

6.4 You must mix the ballot papers so that ballot papers from each ballot box are mixed with ballot papers from at least one other ballot box, and mix the postal ballot papers with ballot papers from at least one other ballot box before sorting and counting the votes.

Sorting and counting

6.5 Ballot papers must be kept face upwards throughout the counting process in order to prevent the number and other unique identifying mark on the back of the ballot paper being seen. The ballot papers should be visible at all times to any candidates, agents and observers present.

6.6 Counting assistants should sort the ballot papers into votes for each candidate. Any doubtful ballot papers should be placed aside for adjudication.

6.7 The number of votes given for each candidate should then be counted and placed into bundles of a predetermined number, e.g., bundles of 20, 25, 50 or 100. A slip bearing the candidate's name, together with the number in the bundle, should be attached to the front. It may be helpful to colour-code the slips. The bundles should then be recounted by another counting assistant in order to ensure the accuracy of the bundle.

6.8 Before removing any bundles from the counting staff, supervisors should flick through the bundles in order to ensure that all of the votes in the bundle are marked in the same way.

6.9 It is unlikely that the number of votes in the final bundle will equal the predetermined bundle number, and so a note should be made of the number of votes in those incomplete bundles and attached to the front of the bundle.

6.10 Any doubtful ballot papers should be set aside for adjudication.

Doubtful ballot papers

6.11 You should adjudicate doubtful ballot papers regularly as the count proceeds: the adjudication of doubtful ballot papers should not be left until the end of the count. You should have regard to the Commission's [booklet on doubtful ballot papers](#) throughout the adjudication process. The booklet contains examples of allowed and rejected votes and the key principles to be followed in the adjudication of doubtful ballot papers. Examples of allowed and rejected ballot papers are also set out on the [doubtful ballot paper placemat](#) which you should have on display at the count for candidates, agents and observers to refer to.

6.12 When adjudicating doubtful ballot papers, you should:

- always be clear and consistent
- take time to ensure that a considered decision is given in every case
- determine whether the intention of the voter clearly appears on the ballot paper

6.13 As part of this, you will need to:

- consider the whole of the ballot paper
- consider whether the way a ballot paper has been marked means that a vote for one candidate is clearly apparent.

6.14 The legislation provides that you must reject a ballot paper:

- that does not bear the official mark (not the unique identifying mark)
- on which votes are given for more than one candidate
- on which anything is written or marked by which the voter can be identified (except the printed ballot paper number or other unique identifying mark)
- that is unmarked or void for uncertainty

6.15 However, the legislation states that unless the way the ballot paper is marked identifies the voter, a ballot paper on which the vote is marked in the following ways must not be rejected if the voter's intention is clear:

- elsewhere than in the proper place
- otherwise than by means of a cross, or

- by more than one mark

6.16 In addition, ballot papers displaying any of the following may require further consideration:

- any ballot paper with anything unusual about it (for example, any ballot paper that appears to have been altered, either with a clearly different writing instrument or with correction fluid)
- any ballot paper torn or damaged in any way

6.17 Ballot papers that appear to be altered, either with a clearly different writing instrument or with correction fluid, should be treated as 'doubtful' and put forward for adjudication, where you must decide on their validity in the presence of candidates, agents and observers. Those that are subsequently declared as valid must be counted and included in the total number of votes cast for the appropriate candidate(s) or party (as applicable) at the election.

6.18 Your decision on any question arising in respect of a ballot paper is final and can only be challenged by way of an election petition. You have a legal duty to draw up a statement showing the number of ballot papers rejected (both completely and in part) and for what reason. You should therefore have a system in place throughout the adjudication process for sorting the rejected ballot papers into the following headings:

- want of official mark
- voting for more than one candidate
- writing or mark by which voter could be identified
- unmarked or void for uncertainty

6.19 You should have regard to the Commission's guidance to ensure accurate and consistent categorisation of rejection for reporting on the statement.

6.20 The legislation requires that each rejected ballot paper must have the word 'rejected' marked on it as appropriate, and the words 'rejection objected to' must be added if a counting agent objects to your decision. Although observers should be able to observe this process, unlike agents, they do not have the legal right to object to the rejection of a ballot paper.

6.21 A copy of the rejection statement should be placed in the package for rejected ballot papers.

Cut ballot papers

6.22 You may come across instances where voters have cut or torn off part of the ballot paper. Whether or not such an extract of a ballot paper can be counted will depend on whether it contains the official mark.

6.23 If it does, the ballot paper can be accepted as a valid vote, provided you are satisfied that:

- the intention of the voter was clear

- the voter has not voted for more than one candidate
- the voter has not made a writing or mark by which they can be identified.



See Chapter 6 of [Part D: Absent voting](#) for guidance on how to deal with cut ballot papers at postal vote openings.

Reconciliation

6.24 Once all of the ballot papers have been sorted and any doubtful ballots adjudicated, the key task of reconciliation can begin.

6.25 All of the bundles and part bundles of ballot papers showing a valid vote for each candidate must be counted. The total for each candidate must then be added to the total number of rejected ballot papers, and this total figure should match exactly the figure giving the total number of ballot papers obtained at the end of the verification process. If the two figures agree you should proceed to the process of consulting the candidates and agents on the provisional result.

6.26 You should be satisfied that the results or totals (as appropriate) reflect the ballots received and so if the figures do not reconcile, the following procedure should be undertaken in order to try to identify and rectify the discrepancy:

- Check the storage area and check to ensure that all ballot boxes have been opened and are empty.
- Check all floors and surfaces for ballot papers that may have been dropped in the count venue.
- Re-check the verification figures and reconciliation for calculation mistakes.
- Ensure that all rejected ballot papers have been accounted for.
- Check that all bundles and part bundles have been counted.
- Consider recounting the ballot papers in the bundles.

6.27 You should also carry out any other checks you deem necessary.

What if you are not able to start the count within four hours of the close of poll?

6.28 If you do not commence the counting of the votes within four hours of the close of poll you must publish and deliver to the Commission a statement setting out the time at which counting did begin, the steps you had taken to comply with the duty and the reasons why the counting of votes had not commenced by 2am. You must also publish the statement, which should include making it available on the local authority's website. We have produced a [template statement for those \(A\)ROs who do not commence counting within four hours of the close of poll](#).

6.29 It is important that you keep a record of all steps taken in order to be able to provide an audit trail demonstrating your decision making processes. If you consider that all reasonable steps have been taken and that a further step is not reasonable, you should keep a record of your consideration and why you have decided it would not be reasonable. You should be able to explain your decisions, and should be prepared to do so in response to enquiries. The statement should include the following:

- Name of constituency
- Name of (Acting) Returning Officer
- The date and time (in 24 hour format, e.g. 03:45) at which the counting of the votes given on the ballot papers began.
- A description of the steps taken to ensure the counting of votes commenced within 4 hours of the close of poll.
- The (Acting) Returning Officer's explanation for why the counting of the votes did not commence by 2am.

6.30 Statements should be sent to your [local Commission office](#), preferably by e-mail, and must be delivered by no later than 30 calendar days of the declaration of result, i.e. by 6 June if the result is declared on 7 May and by 7 June if the result is declared on 8 May. We are legally required to publish in our statutory report on the election a list of all constituencies where counting did not begin within the prescribed timescale.

Provisional result and recounts

6.31 You should be satisfied that the number of votes for each candidate is accurate before proceeding to a provisional result.

6.32 Once satisfied, you should advise candidates and election agents of the provisional result and seek their agreement on the announcement of the result. You should make clear that the candidates and agents are entitled to request a recount. This process should be undertaken within the framework of maximum openness and transparency implemented throughout the various processes so that all candidates and agents can have confidence in the processes and the provisional result provided.

6.33 You must give the candidates and agents sufficient time to digest the provisional result before proceeding with the declaration. It is at this point that any candidate or election agent may request to have the votes recounted or, following a recount, recounted again.

6.34 Once you have consulted on the provisional result, which includes considering any requests for and undertaking any recount(s), you can proceed to declaring the result.

6.35 You must consider any recount request but by law may refuse if, in your opinion, the request is unreasonable. You may, however, consider offering the candidates and agents the opportunity to inspect the bundles of ballot papers as a means of reassuring them that the result is accurate.

6.36 If you agree to recount the votes, the candidates and agents present at the count should be informed before the recount commences and briefed on the processes you are going to follow. As with the original count, any recount should be carried out in full view of those present. You are entitled to reconsider which ballot papers should be rejected during the recount (or any further recount).

6.37 The candidates and agents must be consulted on the revised provisional result in the same way as they were consulted on the provisional result at the conclusion of the first count.

6.38 It is possible to have more than one recount. Again, it is for you to consider any request, and you may refuse if in your opinion the request is unreasonable.

Equality of votes

6.39 When two or more candidates have the same number of votes, you must decide between the candidates by lot.

6.40 Whichever candidate wins the lot is treated as though they had received an additional vote that enables them to be declared elected.

6.41 There is no requirement to draw lots where one candidate is elected by a majority of votes and the equality of votes is between other candidates who are not in first place and therefore cannot be elected.

6.42 The method of drawing lots is for you to decide. Examples of types of lot include:

- ballot papers, each marked with a vote for one of the candidates with the same number of votes, placed in a container, such as an empty ballot box, mixed around, and then one drawn by you
- slips of paper with the candidates' names on them, placed in sealed envelopes, shuffled and then drawn by you

6.43 You should make an announcement that you intend to proceed with the drawing of lots between the candidates having an equal number of votes, explaining precisely what is about to happen and the method to be used. Candidates, agents, Commission representatives and accredited observers should be present during any preparation and the actual drawing of lots.

6.44 If you use the first method described above, you should, in full view of any candidates and agents, and in the presence of Commission representatives and accredited observers, fold and place a previously counted ballot paper for each of the candidates with the same number of votes in an empty ballot box. An assistant should raise the box to a height where you are unable to see the papers inside the box, but are still able to reach inside to pick one. After mixing, you should draw one of the ballot papers from the box, open it, and read the name of the candidate with the vote marked against their name out loud. That candidate is then adjudged to have been allotted an additional vote.

6.45 Similar preparations should be made should you decide to use any other method of drawing lots.

6.46 A statement should be added to the result sheet to the effect that:

- 'Following an equality of votes, lots were drawn and, as a consequence, an extra vote was allotted to candidate X.'

Declaring the results

6.47 The following factors should be taken into account when considering the declaration of results:

- Decide on the exact location in the count venue where the result will be declared and who will be on the platform at this time. The platform should be accessible for all those who need to get up on it. Some local authorities make use of display boards to provide a backdrop for the announcement of results.
- Any announcement equipment should be in place and checked before the count begins.
- Double-check that the result is accurate, and that it is written in the form of words for oral delivery in order to avoid any errors. Media representatives will be keen to ensure that their transmission of results is accurate and so may ask for a written copy to be issued at the time the announcement is made.
- It is a requirement to provide public notice of the name of the candidate(s) elected, the total number of votes given to each candidate and the number of rejected ballot papers under each heading. When a candidate has used their commonly used name to stand in an election, you should use both their full name and their commonly used name when declaring the result.

6.48 Once a result is declared, it is final and cannot be amended. The power to correct procedural errors does not empower you to correct an incorrect result once it has been declared.



Details on giving public notice of the result are provided in [Part F – After the declaration of result.](#)