

# SCOTTISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS – MAY 2017

## INFORMATION IN THE COUNT CENTRE FOR OBSERVERS

### Purpose

To provide some information for Returning Officers on resources that can be deployed to assist those observing the count to better understand the processes involved and where and when they take place.

### Summary

Depending on the size of the count and the venue, Returning Officers should consider using some or all of the following to assist observers (Candidates, Election Agents, Counting Agents, Approved Observers, guests, media representatives, etc) to fulfil their roles at the count: *(consider splitting into general material and things only for C&EAs)*.

- Electoral Commission guidance.
- Pre-election briefings for candidates and election agents.
- Opportunity to see a small scale demonstration of the count process during election week.
- Notes on local count arrangements.
- Information for Counting Agents.
- Posters such as:
  - Workflow diagrams
  - Layouts
  - Key staff, with photographs
  - Doubtful Ballot papers.
- Direction Signage, information on desks showing information such as Ward/ Ballot Box being processed.
- Candidate/ Observer Liaison Officers (with 'Here to Help' identification).
- Announcements/ Comms plan within the count hall(s), with scripts.
- Use of internet, text messaging and social media to inform candidates, agents and general public of progress of the count, including publication of results.
- Verification information to assure candidates on accuracy of that part of the process.
- Sample results from trials to familiarise candidates and election agents with the style of information they will be given.
- Quiet/ private areas to share provisional results.
- Information on how a recount would be managed and announcements about this if a request for a recount is accepted.

## **Detail**

The following paragraphs provide a detailed description of the areas outlined above and refer to EC Guidance as necessary.

The objective is to ensure that candidates and agents receive helpful information about the count both prior to and during the count itself. Time spent on this issue should help to raise the understanding by candidates and agents many of whom may not be all that familiar with the process, reduce the number of queries and/or complaints that may arise at the count itself, to raise confidence in the result and the conduct of the count by the Returning Officer.

## **PRE-COUNT INFORMATION**

### **Briefings for candidates and agents**

- Returning Officers are required to provide briefings to meet the Commission's performance standards
- Briefings should include some information about the count and an opportunity for questions
- Information should include the process for a recount and why candidates might see clearly acceptable votes sent for standard adjudication
- Where possible, Returning Officer staff should try to ascertain whether any candidates or agents have special needs, e.g. Sign language interpreters or translations into Braille.

### **Demonstrations**

- Returning Officers should, if at all possible, invite candidates and agents to a demonstration of the e-counting system in the week of the election.
- The demo should include a walkthrough of the system with a particular batch of ballot papers to explain each step of the process and highlight the key points for counting agents.

## **AT THE COUNT**

### **Written information**

Providing written guidance is a requirement of the Commission's performance standards.

The Commission has supported supplying booklets to those attending the count to help them understand a process which they may not be familiar with. Providing appropriate information is even more important at an electronic count.

The Commission's guidance suggests that such a booklet should include:

- Photographs and names of key count personnel, including the Returning Officer.
- Layout of the count venue, including what will happen where and when.
- A list of ballot boxes and the names of the polling stations they relate to.
- A flowchart of the count process.

Other items that could be included are:

- Information for counting agents.
- Key facts and figures about the election in the council area.
- A profile of each ward.
- Information about the last election in each ward.
- A table in which agents/ observers can copy the result if copies are not being made generally available.

It is recognised that some of these are likely to have been included in nomination packs but it may be worthwhile issuing them to a wider audience.

## **Signage**

- Information should be posted on walls or information boards around the count centre in areas where agents and observers can see it.
- Segments of the count booklet could be enlarged, such as the layout, photographs and names of key staff, and count flowchart.
- Each different part of the count process should be clearly signposted.
- The Commission recommends that signs should be in at least 26 point text and high enough to allow them to be read from a distance and over the heads of other people.
- A plasma screen(s) with information provided from the e-counting system on the stages of each ward count, declared results or other relevant information.

The signs could say what will happen at that desk, for example:

### **Adjudication**

If the e-counting system has been unable to process a ballot paper automatically it will be viewed here and either passed as a good paper or deferred to Returning Officer Adjudication for a final decision.

## **Verification**

- Returning Officers should on request, supply a copy of a verification statement to any election agent (see The Scottish Local Government Elections Amendment (No. 2) Order 2016). **The EMB recommends that Returning Officers should supply a copy of the verification statement to Election Agents as soon as possible after all batches for a ward have been registered and verified to help assure them that the count is being conducted accurately.**

- Verification staff should be prepared to confirm verification of any box with any candidates or agents observing the process at that point. Acceptance of verification at this point is an essential part of assuring that the count is being conducted transparently.
- This will enable any queries to be answered before that ballot box is processed further and limit the likelihood of challenge before the result is declared and reduce the risk of an election petition

### **Public Announcements**

- A public announcement system that works well is important for communicating with everyone present in the count centre.
- Any public address system should be properly tested before the count begins.
- The test should check that announcements can be heard clearly in all parts of the count hall where candidates and agents will be.
- If possible, it should also be tested when there are a large number of people in the room to simulate a crowded environment.
- The Returning Officer should address all observers at the start of the count to welcome them, make any housekeeping announcements, and explain the different processes that will be followed.
- Where the count is being conducted on a phased basis the Returning Officer should repeat this information at appropriate stages.

### **Candidate/ Observer Liaison Officers**

- Returning Officers should consider appointing candidate/ observer liaison officers
- There could be one for each ward, or a couple of wards depending on the size of the count and how it is being managed.
- These officers would need to be aware of how the count was progressing in order to answer questions from any candidate or agent.
- They should be included as key contacts in the count booklet and on count centre information posters.
- Returning Officers should consider how best Liaison Officers could help agents and observers understand the count process and provide appropriate training and instructions. Options would include walking the candidates and agents for a ward through the entire count process start to finish with a single batch, explaining each stage, what it is for and what the agents should be looking for. However, the conditions in the count centre may not be conducive due to noise and space limitations. Alternatively, a general walk through the count venue describing each of the count processes may be sufficient.

## **CONCLUDING THE COUNT**

### **Doubtful Ballots**

- Agents need to be told from the beginning of the count that ballot papers that do not meet system threshold tests for character recognition will be adjudicated and

that they can see this at the adjudication screens, or at the RO review screen in the case of ballot papers that need entered manually.

- Returning Officer staff should explain that agents are likely to see some apparently good ballot papers sent for adjudication. This is because the threshold tests in the character recognition software are applied to each individual character written on the ballot paper. While the voting preferences may be clear in the context of looking at the whole ballot paper one or more of the characters may have failed the test.
- Agents should also be assured that the threshold level for the system to be able to process a ballot paper automatically has been set following extensive testing to ensure that all voting information is processed accurately.
- Copies of the Commission's doubtful ballot placemats and booklet should be available to agents in advance and at this stage.
- A public announcement should be made to call all candidates and election agents together for Returning Officer adjudication.
- The Returning Officer (or authorised DRO) should talk candidates and election agents through the reason for rejecting or accepting each ballot paper to help their understanding.

## **Results**

- The Returning Officer or DRO should take time to talk candidates and agents through each stage of the provisional result and answer any questions.
- Once they have had time to digest the provisional result, invite them to agree that the result should be declared.
- The Returning Officer should then make a public announcement using to the Declaration Report generated by the e-count system.

## **Re-count**

- A Returning Officer is only likely to agree to a re-count in exceptional circumstances. If a request for a recount is not accepted, the Returning Officer should explain why.
- The Returning Officer should then make a public announcement that there will be a recount in that ward.

## **POST-ELECTION ACTIVITY**

- Many candidates and agents will be interested to see the detailed election results that Returning Officers must publish a week after the declaration. They should be informed of where and when it will be available.
- Returning Officers should be prepared to advise candidates and agents on request of the time by which they must lodge an election petition and which sheriff court they should contact for further information.
- The relevant Sheriff Court has jurisdiction for cases in that ward.