SCOTTISH LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS
ELECTRONIC VOTE COUNTING FACTSHEET

When and where are electronic counts held?

The most recent Scottish Local Government elections were held on 5th May 2022 and the votes counted on 6th May 2022. An electronic counting system was used and dedicated Count Centres were in place for each of the 32 Councils in Scotland. All Counts were completed by late afternoon on 6th May.

Some ROs choose to use electronic counting for local government by-elections. The system used for the May 2022 elections will continue to be used in by-elections until the end of 2026.

Why are Scottish Local Government elections counted electronically?

Council Elections in Scotland use a form of proportional representation voting called the Single Transferable Voting system (STV). Voters select 1 or more candidates in order of their preference e.g., 1, 2, 3, 4. Any candidate who obtains a quota of votes – a minimum number of votes – will be elected. Where there are vacancies remaining, the candidate with the lowest number of votes is excluded and their vote for a 2nd or subsequent preference is transferred to continuing candidates, at a lower value. This process is repeated until another candidate reaches the quota, or until the number of candidates still in the contest equals the number vacancies remaining. This is a complex and time consuming process that could take days to complete if counted manually. To make the counts quicker and easier Scottish Local Government Elections have been counted electronically since STV was introduced in 2007.

Overview of electronic counting

The electronic counting system performs various tasks, including:

- Scanning each ballot paper;
- Identifying the voter's preferences by reading the scanned ballot paper;
- Counting the voter's preferences where these are clear;
- Sending the scanned image of the ballot paper to an Adjudicator for review or to the Returning Officer for a decision if the voter's intentions are uncertain;
- Checking that the number of ballot papers received and processed are the same to ensure the accuracy and completeness of each Election result;
- Calculating the Election result for each ward;
- Producing reports showing the Election result, including: the number of valid first preference votes cast for each candidate; the value of any transferred votes; and the ballot papers rejected by the RO as invalid.

How do you know that the electronic counting system works?

The eCounting system that was used in May 2022 - and will continue to be used for electronically counted by-elections until 2027 – has been thoroughly tested. The software that calculates the results has been certified by an independent organisation to confirm that the STV method is being applied correctly.

How are ballot papers processed by the electronic counting system?

The eCounting system uses Intelligent Character Recognition (ICR) software to read what the voter has marked on a ballot paper. It then performs a series of checks on what it reads from the scanned image. The system will automatically process a ballot paper only if there is no doubt as to the voter's preferences and the preference votes have been made correctly e.g. 1,2,3,4. If there is any doubt about the voter's preferences, or if a voter has made a mistake in their preferences e.g. placed the number "1" against more than 1 candidate, the system will automatically send the ballot paper for review by a person known as an Adjudicator.

What happens to ballot papers that are not processed automatically?

If a ballot paper does not pass the IT system checks, the scanned image is sent to an Adjudicator. This person views the ballot paper image to see if the voter's intentions can be confirmed. In many cases, the voter's intentions will be obvious when the ballot paper is viewed. A common question is why the ballot paper needs reviewed when it looks clear. This is often because, for example, what might look like a "1" to a person might also look a bit like a "7" to an IT system. The IT system is set up to send anything doubtful to an Adjudicator. Typically, between 15% and 20% of ballot papers need to be reviewed by an Adjudicator.

The Adjudicator will accept ballot papers where the voter's preferences are clear and in accordance with the STV rules. Where the voter's intentions are not clear, for example, because they have not marked "1" on their ballot paper, or they have marked "1" against more than one candidate, the Adjudicator must refer the ballot paper to the Returning Officer. Adjudicators cannot reject a ballot paper and neither can the electronic counting system. It is the Returning Officer's responsibility to decide if a doubtful vote is valid or not and only they or their appointed Depute can decide to reject a ballot paper.

What if someone puts in fake ballot papers?

Security is a priority in every polling station and at the Count Centres. Incidences of attempted fraud are very rare. In the unlikely event that someone did try to introduce a fake ballot paper, it would be detected by the eCounting system. Every ballot paper has a unique code and the IT system must find a match for it from a list of valid codes for the Ward. If there is no match, this means the ballot paper could be a fake and the system will send it direct to the RO for investigation. If the same code is found on more than one ballot paper, e.g. it has been photocopied, all the duplicate ballot paper images are sent by the system to the RO. The RO will inspect the actual paper ballots where election fraud is suspected.

Can the electronic counting system be hacked?

The IT system cannot be hacked from outside the Count Centre or be subject to a cyber attack since each Count Centre is completely separate from the others and there is no connection between the electronic counting system and the internet. The IT system also has many security features built into it to ensure that nothing can be tampered with.