



Performance standards for Returning Officers in Great Britain

December 2011

Presented to Parliament pursuant to section 9A of the Political Parties,
Elections and Referendums Act 2000

Translations and other formats

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1 Overview

Background

1.1 The Electoral Administration Act 2006 gave the Electoral Commission powers to set and monitor performance standards for electoral services. Under these provisions, the Commission may:

- **determine** and publish standards of performance for relevant electoral officers in Great Britain (Electoral Registration Officers, Returning Officers and Counting Officers)
- direct relevant officers to provide the Commission with reports regarding their **performance** against the published standards
- **publish** its assessment of the level of performance by relevant officers against the published standards

1.2 In March 2009 the Commission published performance standards for Returning Officers (ROs) and reported on the performance of ROs following the European Parliamentary elections in 2009 and the UK general election in 2010. Following consultation with the Secretary of State (as required by the legislation) and key stakeholders, the revised standards, are enclosed.

The performance standards

1.3 Underlying our performance standards framework is a focus on the way in which Returning Officers carry out their functions with a view to ensuring that elections are conducted with the interests of voters in mind and in line with a set of key principles for each election, which are as follows:

- **Participation:** it should be straightforward for people to participate in our elections, whether campaigning or voting; and people should be confident that their voice counts
- **Trust:** people should be able to trust the way our elections work
- **No undue influence:** there should be no undue influence in the way our elections work

1.4 The performance standards aim to focus on outcomes rather than simply on the completion of process. However, the timely and effective completion of some key processes (with measurable outputs) is predictive of well-conducted elections. The standards therefore seek to measure outputs which, if achieved, will deliver certain outcomes.

1.5 The performance standards framework will monitor Returning Officers' processes in the following areas:

- Planning and organisation
- Administering the poll
- Absent voting
- Verifying and counting the votes
- After the declaration of results

1.6 Each of the performance standards contains:

- the title of the standard
- the aim of the standard
- what Returning Officers must do in order to meet the standard
- the data/evidence required to demonstrate performance against the standard

1.7 Wherever the standard states that a task 'must' be completed this constitutes a requirement which must be met by Returning Officers in order to meet a particular standard.

1.8 The following pages set out the 10 performance standards for Returning Officers, which include 37 requirements in total.

1.9 The Commission will provide guidance to assist Returning Officers in meeting the standards. This guidance will form part of our best practice guidance for Returning Officers on planning for and administering elections.

2 Performance standards for Returning Officers in Great Britain

Planning and organisation

2.1 The key objective of the standard in this area is to ensure that adequate preparations are made in advance of each poll, in order to ensure that risks are identified and properly managed and that the poll is well run.

Performance standard 1a: Planning for an election	
Aim: To develop and put in place robust planning processes for an election.	
<p>To meet the standard, the Returning Officer must demonstrate that they have prepared a project plan, that it is treated as a 'living document' and kept under regular review, and is used to monitor progress and report on lessons learnt. The plan must include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Clearly defined objectives and success measures.• Contingency planning and business continuity arrangements.• Identification of the required resources.• Identification of staffing requirements, including any necessary recruitment arrangements.• A training plan which identifies the training needs of permanent and temporary staff.• An assessment of the need to outsource, the management of contractors and suppliers if outsourcing is considered appropriate and the development and management of contracts.• Identification of suitable venues for all processes.	<p>Data/evidence required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Project plan.• Risk register.

- Processes in place to identify any patterns of activity that might indicate potential integrity issues and what steps are to be taken to deal with any such integrity issues.
- Plan to deliver key electoral processes, including the management of the absent voting process and verification and count arrangements.
- Public awareness activity.
- Processes in place to manage potential enquiries from observers and to support their attendance at the electoral processes they are entitled to attend.
- Plan to evaluate procedures post-election and identify lessons learnt (see standard 5b).

The Returning Officer must demonstrate that they have prepared a risk register, that it is treated as a 'living document' and kept under regular review, and is used to monitor progress and any changes in risk identified. The risk register must identify:

- Any difficulties and problems that may occur, and the actions taken to mitigate them.
- The seriousness of any risk by indicating both the likelihood of risk occurring and the impact of the risk if it did occur.

Administering the poll

2.2 The key objective of the standards in this area is to ensure that all voters share a consistent experience and receive the same high-quality service irrespective of where they are registered, and candidates and agents are provided with clear and timely information to enable them to engage effectively in the election process.

Performance standard 2a: Polling station set-up	
Aim: Establish polling stations in such a way as to enable access for all voters and to ensure that polling can be carried out efficiently.	
<p>To meet the standard the Returning Officer must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When making arrangements for polling stations, consider access needs.• Ensure that when allocating electors and staff to polling stations you have regard to Electoral Commission guidance.• Design and print the 'Guidance for voters' and 'Instructions for voters' in accordance with any example templates that the Electoral Commission has issued or designed in line with the criteria set out in the Electoral Commission guidance.• Ensure that all polling station staff are trained to set-up polling stations in such a way that takes account of voter needs, considering voter throughput and flow and how the voter will move through the voting process from entering to exiting the polling station.	<p>Data/evidence required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Details of assessment regarding access needs, identifying any problems and actions taken to remedy these.• Details of approach taken to allocating electors and staff to polling stations and examples of any instances where you have taken an alternative approach to Electoral Commission guidance.• An example of the 'Guidance for voters' and 'Instructions for voters' notices.• Details of the guidance/training provided to polling station staff on how to set up polling stations.

Performance standard 2b: Producing ballot papers, poll cards and notices

Aim: Provide all materials in accessible formats that are easy for voters to use and understand.

<p>To meet the standard the Returning Officer must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Produce poll cards in accordance with any example templates that the Electoral Commission has issued or designed in line with the criteria set out in the Electoral Commission guidance.• Ensure a process is in place for proof-checking poll cards.• Ensure first issue of poll cards are dispatched by date specified in Electoral Commission guidance.• Ensure that a process is in place for proof-checking ballot papers.• Take steps to ensure the security of ballot papers during production and storage.• Produce the notice of election and notice of poll and make them accessible for anyone interested in them, such as through the local authority's website.	<p>Data/evidence required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• An example of each of the ordinary poll card and postal voters' poll card.• Details of arrangements in place for proof-checking poll cards.• Scheduled date of despatch of poll cards and actual date of despatch of poll cards.• Details of arrangements in place for proof-checking ballot papers.• Details of the steps taken to ensure the security of ballot papers.• Link(s) to the page(s) on the local authority website on which the notice of election and notice of poll have been published.
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Performance standard 2c: Candidates and agents

Aim: Effectively communicate information to candidates and agents.

<p>To meet the standard the Returning Officer must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure that candidates have the opportunity to have their nomination papers informally checked prior to their formal submission.• Ensure that candidates and/or election agents are offered briefing sessions on the election process, including local arrangements.• Ensure that candidates and/or election agents are issued with written guidance on the election process, including local	<p>Data/evidence required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Details of the arrangements in place for candidates to have their nomination papers informally checked prior to formal submission.• Date(s) of briefing sessions, and include briefing resources (if applicable).• Written guidance on the election process, including local arrangements, issued to candidates and/or election
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<p>arrangements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that candidates and/or election agents are issued with information on calculating the expenses limit (including the electorate number), spending returns and declarations to enable them to meet reporting requirements. 	<p>agents.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information issued to candidates and/or election agents on calculating the expenses limit (including the electorate number).
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Absent voting

2.3 The key objective of the standards in this area is to ensure that the absent voting process is conducted in a professional, transparent and secure manner, with a clear audit trail, and in such a way as to ensure that all absent voters share a consistent experience and receive the same high-quality service irrespective of where they are registered.

<p>Performance standard 3a: Producing postal vote stationery</p> <p>Aim: Maintain voter confidence in the electoral process, with easy to use forms enabling eligible postal voters to participate in the absent voting process.</p>	
<p>To meet the standard the Returning Officer must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce postal voting statements in accordance with any example templates provided by the Electoral Commission or designed in line with the criteria set out in the Electoral Commission guidance. • Ensure a process is in place for proof-checking postal vote stationery. 	<p>Data/evidence required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An example of the postal voting statement. • Details of arrangements in place for proof-checking postal vote stationery.

Performance standard 3b: Issuing of postal votes

Aim: All postal voters should receive their postal ballot packs as early as possible to give them sufficient time to receive, complete and return their postal vote.

<p>To meet the standard the Returning Officer must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure first issue of postal votes is undertaken by date specified in Electoral Commission guidance.• Prioritise postal ballot packs which are to be sent overseas.• Designate a member of the project team to monitor outsourced work and the work of the contractor, specifically attending those parts of the issuing process that have been contracted out.• Maintain a clear audit trail of the issue of postal ballot packs.	<p>Data/evidence required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scheduled dates of despatch of postal ballot packs (not including postal votes to be sent overseas) and actual dates of despatch.• Scheduled date of despatch of postal ballot packs to be sent overseas and actual date of despatch.• Details of the arrangements in place for the monitoring of outsourced work, and in particular arrangements for attending those parts of the issuing process you have contracted out.• Details of the arrangements in place for recording the number of postal votes issued at the end of each issuing session and when issuing replacement postal ballot packs, including a copy of the statement as to postal ballot papers.
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Performance standard 3c: Receiving and opening postal votes

Aim: Maintain confidence and transparency in the process by keeping a clear and robust audit trail and ensuring that all those entitled to attend the postal vote opening processes are able to see and understand what is being carried out, where and when.

<p>To meet the standard the Returning Officer must:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify the number and timing of postal vote opening sessions and make arrangements as necessary.• Make contact with Royal Mail to confirm arrangements for the return of postal votes.• Maintain a clear audit trail of the receipt and opening of postal ballot packs, recording the total number of envelopes received and the number of envelopes counted as part of the opening process and ensuring that all of the figures required for completion of the statement as to postal ballot papers are accurately recorded.• Maintain the secure storage of postal ballots at all times and ensure that postal votes are transported securely to the opening and count venues.• Ensure that those entitled to attend opening sessions are able to follow what is happening, where and when.• Put arrangements in place to check 100% of postal vote identifiers.	<p>Data/evidence required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scheduled dates of postal vote opening sessions.• Details of arrangements in place with Royal Mail, including for the return of postal votes and for any final sweep to be carried out on polling day.• Details of the arrangements in place to maintain a clear audit trail of the receipt and opening of postal ballot packs, including a copy of the statement as to postal ballot papers.• Details of the arrangements in place to securely store the postal ballots and for transporting them to the opening and count venues.• Layout plan of opening venue and details of workflow.• % of postal vote identifiers to be checked and actual % of postal vote identifiers checked. Where 100% is not checked, details of why you are/were unable to check all of the statements.
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Verifying and counting the votes

2.4 The key objective of the standard in this area is to ensure that the verification and count processes are administered consistently and effectively, and produce an accurate result which everyone can have confidence in.

Performance standard 4a: Effective verification and count processes	
Aim: Ensure confidence and transparency at the verification and count.	
To meet the standard the Returning Officer must ensure:	Data/evidence required:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All 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.• The count processes are capable of producing an accurate result, with a clear audit trail.• Appropriate resources are in place to ensure the verification and count is timely.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Layout plan of count venue and workflow.• Details and examples of information provided to attendees.• Details of the arrangements in place to maintain a clear audit trail of the count processes.• Number of verification and count staff.

After the declaration of results

2.5 The key objective of the standards in this area is to ensure the appropriate storage and disposal of documents, and ensure that a full review of all procedures takes place to inform lessons learnt and planning for future events.

Performance standard 5a: Forwarding and storage of documents

Aim: Package and forward/store documents as transparently as possible, to ensure that anyone who is entitled to and who wishes to inspect public documents after the election is able to do so.

To meet the standard the Returning Officer must:

- Put arrangements in place at an early stage for forwarding and/or storage of documentation.
- Maintain a clear audit trail when packaging/forwarding the documents.
- Forward copies of candidate returns they hold to the Electoral Commission as required for each election

Data/evidence required:

- Details of arrangements in place for forwarding and/or storage of documentation.
- Details of the arrangements in place to maintain a clear audit trail to cover the packaging/forwarding of documents.
- Copies of the candidate returns.

Performance standard 5b: Review of election procedures

Aim: This standard aims to evaluate the conduct of the election and to identify any improvements for future electoral events.

To meet the standard the Returning Officer must:

- Carry out a thorough evaluation of all processes outlined in the project plan, seeking feedback from appropriate stakeholders, and produce a lessons learnt document which will be used to inform the project plan and risk register for future electoral events.

Data/evidence required:

- Evidence of evaluation plans in project plan (see standard 1a).
- Lessons learnt document.

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