

Sent via e-mail

Dear Colleagues

I am writing following discussions you have had with Electoral Commission staff about the announcement of count totals at the local and regional level during the EU Referendum after the close of poll at 10pm on 23 June. The EU Referendum Management Board (EURMB), which I chair, comprising the 11 Regional Counting Officers (RCOs) and their representatives, and the Counting Officer for Northern Ireland, discussed this at our meeting on 9 March.

I understand that you were sighted on the relevant text included in the papers we discussed, but in short, the issue you had raised related to whether it would be possible for the announcement of local count totals to be delayed until a certain number of totals in that region were ready to be announced. Your proposal was that the RCO would then declare these local totals from the regional count location in addition to them being declared at the same time locally.

I can confirm that EURMB collectively agreed that this will not be possible. Counting Officers are legally required to make a declaration of their local total and our strong view is that, once they are ready to do this, it should be announced as soon as possible. It is essential for public confidence in the referendum that there is complete transparency of the electoral process.

Counting agents will be told the provisional result once ballot papers have been counted, as it is at this point that they may request a recount if they think this is necessary. It is inevitable that once this has happened, others (locally and at national and regional campaign centres) will become aware of the provisional result. If the declaration were held back for what could potentially be a significant period of time beyond this point confidence in the transparency of the process could be undermined amongst others present at the count, including observers. In today's world where digital communication enables rumours and speculation to spread, it is hard to see how holding back announcements would not lead to wider speculation and potentially to a loss of confidence in the count process itself.

In addition to this basic principle of transparency, there are also significant operational and practical reasons why this approach would not be possible. As you will appreciate, our priority is ensuring an accurate result and maintaining confidence in the poll. RCOs will be required to provide advice and guidance on the night to Counting Officers across their region and to liaise with my team as needed on any significant issues. This must

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be the priority and as a result, committing to co-ordinating and declaring local totals in their region when there may be live issues in other parts of the region that require their close attention would not be possible.

I am aware that you are scheduled to meet my team later this week, and I know that this will be a disappointing reply, but I hope it is helpful to have clarity on this issue now, following last week's discussion.

I can confirm that EURMB also agreed that we will collect expected declaration times from local teams and will share these with you and publish them on our website by mid-April. My team will also aim to share with you shortly a contact in each RCO office that you can liaise with for any regional media arrangements, which I hope will be helpful.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank you for the constructive approach you have taken to engaging with my team to date in relation to the arrangements for the national count event, and for the coverage which you have given to the EU referendum so far which is important in terms of raising voter awareness of the poll.

I hope that we can continue to work with you to provide the information that you need more broadly for your coverage (for example on voter registration deadlines), as well as to ensure that we continue to have a shared understanding of what is possible on the night to help inform your, and our, planning.

Yours faithfully



Jenny Watson
Chief Counting Officer