

Part E – Verifying and counting the votes

Referendum on the UK's membership
of the European Union: guidance for
Counting Officers

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This guidance uses 'must' when referring to a specific legal requirement; 'should' is used for items considered to be recommended practice, but which are not legal requirements.

Translations and other formats

All of our guidance and resources for these polls are also available in Welsh.

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Updates to this document

Updated	Description of change	Paragraph number
May 2016	Updated to reflect the final legislation (including confirmation of the date of the poll) and the confirmed Chief Counting Officer directions, and to include legislative references	
May 2016	Additional text regarding disclosure of area totals when your verification and count is broken into self-contained areas	2.3

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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 contents of the box have 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 answer to the referendum question (i.e. for 'Remain' and for 'Leave') and rejected votes matches the total number of ballot papers given on the verification statement
- 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.
- The communication of information at the verification and count is clear and timely.

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 voting area
- the size of the voting area
- size and capacity of your venue
- cost
- transparency for all entitled to attend

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.



Direction

The CCO has directed that COs ensure that verification and count arrangements are structured in such a way as to break down the verification and count into a number of self-contained 'areas' smaller than the voting area, with the totals for each of these 'areas' aggregated into a single total for the voting area. The CCO has also directed that the counting of votes for any self-contained 'area' must not be commenced until the verification for that 'area' has been completed.

2.2 Carrying out verification and count processes in self-contained areas is an effective way of managing the process and helps to produce accurate local totals with a clear audit trail, with any issues more easily identified and resolved. The CCO's direction does not require any specific model to be followed and so you should use your local experience and knowledge to inform the development of your verification and count processes.

2.3 You will need to determine the size and number of 'areas' that you will break your verification and count into (for example, by ward) and identify the approach that will enable you to best manage the process within your own experience and circumstances. You could, for example, verify and count on a ward basis and then aggregate the totals from each ward, or you could sub-divide the voting area in some other way and then add together the sub-voting area totals to give the overall local total for the voting area. When determining the areas you will use, you should consider that there will likely be interest from parties and campaigners regarding the totals in a particular electoral area. Whichever approach you take to determining the areas that you will break your verification and count into, you should be prepared to release your local totals by area.

2.4 In developing your plans you should consider how you can allocate a similar number of ballot papers to each of the smaller 'areas' so that all the parts into which the voting area has been sub-divided finish at approximately the same time. This will help to avoid any delays in obtaining overall figures for the voting area.

2.5 You should also liaise with the RCO to agree a mechanism for keeping them informed of progress at the verification and count, particularly in the event of any issues arising.



This guidance should be read alongside the [verification and count toolkit](#), 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.

The CCO recognises that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach which can be applied to running the verification and count process at a referendum. Every 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 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

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

2.7 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 referendum.

2.8 You should review your assumptions to ensure they continue to be realistic and robust, including your assumptions on turnout, 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.

2.9 To help build confidence in your plan for the verification and count, you should, as a minimum, share information on your plan with the RCO and the local referendum agents.

Timing of the verification and count



Direction

The CCO has directed that the verification and counting of votes is commenced at 10pm in the UK and 11pm in Gibraltar.

2.10 You are required to make arrangements for the verification and counting of votes to commence at 10pm in the UK and 11pm in Gibraltar. While there will be logistical issues which will impact on how much activity can be carried out in the period immediately following the close of poll, it should nevertheless be possible to start the verification from 10pm in the UK, for example by

commencing the verification of postal ballot boxes from earlier opening sessions.

2.11 There will be an expectation among campaigners and the media that local totals will be declared as soon as possible after the close of poll. Working with the CCO and your RCO, you will need to plan carefully how to manage the expectations of campaigners and the media.

2.12 The period of time specified for the count to take place should be such that you can resource and conduct a well-run count process within it, ensuring accurate local totals in which voters, campaigners and agents can have confidence.

2.13 Your plan should also identify key points during the count process at which you will review progress against the expected schedule. This progress review should be used to keep the agents, as well as the RCO, informed of progress at the count.

Staffing and training

2.14 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.



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

2.15 Layout plans of your verification and count venue should also be prepared. Your layout plans 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.

2.16 So that those attending the count can have confidence that the count process is well-managed and can have confidence in the local totals, 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.

2.17 You should ensure that all equipment, including the equipment to be used to transmit information and local totals to the RCO, is set up and tested in advance of the verification and count. You should also ensure that you have contingency arrangements in place in case of equipment or power malfunction. Rehearsals of the count collation process will be carried out in advance of the referendum, and information on when these will take place and what they will involve will be provided separately.



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 and a checklist of useful materials, see our verification and count resource '[Planning for an effective verification and count: a toolkit for Counting Officers](#)'.

Communicating during the verification and count

2.18 Good communication, both at local 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 processes to be followed can also help to lower the number of queries raised by campaigners or referendum agents – particularly taking into account that some of those attending may not be familiar with electoral processes and how verification and count processes work – thus reducing the pressure on staff.

2.19 You should, for example, produce and distribute an information pack to anyone attending the count.

2.20 Using a public address system to make announcements about what is happening where and when throughout the verification and count processes will help keep campaigners and referendum agents informed and alert them to any particular processes they may wish to observe closely (e.g. at the adjudication of doubtful ballot papers).

2.21 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.

2.22 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.

2.23 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. These should be large enough to be clearly visible, and should 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 pack.
- 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 campaigners, 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 – to be followed by provision of the actual verification statements and statements of local totals.



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 Counting Officers](#)'.

Managing attendees

2.24 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.

2.25 You should ensure that all attendees at the count, including referendum agents, counting agents, observers 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.

2.26 You should also decide on a policy for the use of mobile phones and photography / filming in the verification and count venue and provide this information to those who are entitled to attend in advance.

2.27 Tickets or admission 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.

2.28 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** for further guidance on who is entitled to attend the verification and count.

Ensuring the security of ballot papers

2.29 You should take all necessary steps to ensure the security of ballot papers and relevant stationery from the close of poll through to the declaration of the local totals. This should include identifying what processes would be followed if there is an unforeseen break in the proceedings.

2.30 You should ensure the security of the ballot papers at all times. If you need to store ballot papers, you must store them in sealed ballot boxes in a secure place, allowing agents to attach their seals to the ballot boxes¹. You should always open the sealed ballot boxes in clear view of any agents present, so they can satisfy themselves that nobody has interfered with the ballot papers and the ballot boxes.

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

2.32 You should also brief campaigners 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 Counting Officers](#)'.

3 Attendance at the verification and count

Who can attend?

3.1 The following people are entitled by law to attend the verification and count²:

- you and your staff
- the Chief Counting Officer
- the Regional Counting Officer
- referendum agents
- counting agents
- Commission representatives
- accredited observers
- any other person permitted by you as CO to attend (see paragraph 3.6 below)

3.2 You must give notice in writing to counting agents appointed of the time and place at which the verification and counting of votes will start³.

3.3 You must give counting agents reasonable facilities for overseeing the verification and counting of the votes⁴. 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.

3.4 You should take all necessary steps to ensure that anyone attending does not interfere with or compromise the secrecy of the vote. You must make such arrangements as you think fit to ensure that all attendees are provided with a copy of the relevant [secrecy requirements](#)⁵.

3.5 You should notify those who will be attending the verification and count of the earliest time that they will be allowed to enter the venue. After that time, those entitled to attend should be admitted whenever they arrive and a procedure should be in place so that any attendee who wishes to leave and return later is not prevented from doing so.

3.6 You can, at your discretion, permit other people to attend the proceedings if you are satisfied that it will not impede the efficient verification or counting of votes and, in the case of the count, you have either consulted the referendum agents in advance or thought it impracticable to do so⁶.

Controlling admission

3.7 You should provide lists of those persons entitled to attend the verification and count to those on duty at the entrance, and instruct security staff to check the tickets or passes of anyone seeking to attend.

3.8 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.

3.9 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](#).

3.10 You must give counting agents reasonable facilities for overseeing the verification and counting of the votes, and provide them with relevant information. In particular, when the ballot papers are sorted according to each answer to the referendum question, the counting agents are entitled to satisfy themselves that the ballot papers are correctly sorted⁷.

Accredited observers

3.11 Electoral observation is a legitimate and valuable part of the electoral process, and care should be taken not to hinder or obstruct any observers. While you are permitted to limit the number of observers who may be present at any one time during the verification and count, you should exercise caution in doing so. You are not entitled to bar all observers from the verification and count, only limit the number of observers present at any one time, and this discretion must be exercised reasonably.⁸

3.12 You must have regard to the [Commission's Code of practice for observers](#) when managing the attendance of observers⁹.



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

Commission representatives

3.13 Commission representatives are 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 count¹⁰.

The media

3.14 You should include space and opportunity for the media to report on the local totals. 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.

3.15 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 questions relating to the administration of the referendum.

3.16 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 local total declaration times.

3.17 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 mobile telephones, cameras and other recording equipment¹¹.



For practical guidance on liaising with the media, see our verification and count resource '[Planning for an effective verification and count: a toolkit for Counting Officers](#)'.

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

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. 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 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 spoilt 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 process¹². 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 in order to check the list against the ballot paper account¹³.

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 proxies¹⁴. 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 also be subject to verification¹⁵. 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



Direction

The CCO has directed that COs ensure that verification and count arrangements are structured in such a way as to break down the verification and count into a number of self-contained 'areas' smaller than the voting area, with the totals for each of these 'areas' aggregated into a single total for the voting area. The CCO has also directed that the counting of votes for any self-contained 'area' must not be commenced until the verification for that 'area' has been completed.

5.1 Ensuring accuracy at the verification stage is crucial to ensuring a timely and accurate count. If, for example, the verification figures are wrong, there will be a variance against the count totals at the end of the count which will need to be resolved and which therefore risks significantly slowing the overall process.

5.2 Carrying out verification and count processes in self-contained 'areas' is an effective way of managing the process and helps to produce accurate local totals with a clear audit trail, with any issues more easily identified and resolved.



See **Chapter 2** for details on the key considerations that should inform your decisions on how to manage the verification and count.

5.3 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.

5.4 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](#).

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

5.6 You must verify each ballot paper account and draw up a statement as to the result of the verification¹⁶. 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 this¹⁷, and you should make available copies of this for the agents present once the

verification has been completed. The verification statement is a key communication tool that will help to ensure that agents are confident that the processes at the verification and count are transparent and that they will produce accurate local totals.

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

5.8 Where there has been more than one ballot box used in a station they should be verified simultaneously at adjacent tables or one after the other at the same table.

5.9 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 counted¹⁸.
- b. Staff must open the ballot boxes in the presence of any counting agents and observers that are present¹⁹. 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 must keep the ballot papers face up at all times during the verification and count²⁰.
- d. You should show the empty box to the agents and observers so that they can be satisfied that it is indeed empty.
- e. 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 should be removed and handed to the supervisor.
- f. 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 spoilt ballot papers, as well as the tendered votes list, against the figures on each ballot paper account²¹. 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.

5.10 If a ballot paper account does not reconcile with the number of ballot papers in the ballot box, 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 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 ballot box for the 'wrong' polling station. If the compensating errors all balance, the verification can be deemed to be 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, re-count 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 re-counted 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.

5.11 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 process²².

5.12 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 poll²³. You should sign the statement. Any agent may make a copy of the statement as to the result of the verification and, to promote confidence in the figures, you should make copies available for the agents present once verification has been completed.

5.13 You must inform the RCO of the contents of the verification statement once the statement is drawn up²⁴. Further guidance on the processes and

systems for submitting verification figures will be provided separately by the CCO and your RCO.

5.14 You should take all necessary steps to ensure the security of the ballot papers and the relevant stationery during any unforeseen break in the verification and count proceedings. Further guidance on ensuring the security of ballot boxes can be found in paragraph **2.29** above and our verification and count resource '[Planning for an effective verification and count: a toolkit for Counting Officers](#)'.

6 The count

Counting the votes



Direction

The CCO has directed that COs ensure that verification and count arrangements are structured in such a way as to break down the verification and count into a number of self-contained 'areas' smaller than the voting area, with the totals for each of these 'areas' aggregated into a single total for the voting area. The CCO has also directed that the counting of votes for any self-contained 'area' must not be commenced until the verification for that 'area' has been completed.

6.1 Carrying out verification and count processes in self-contained 'areas' is an effective way of managing the process and helps to produce accurate local totals with a clear audit trail, with any issues more easily identified and resolved.

6.2 While the CCO has directed that in each of the self-contained 'areas' the counting of votes should not be commenced until the verification has been completed, this does not mean that COs have to wait for the verification to be complete across all 'areas' before commencing the count. COs may start counting the votes in those 'areas' where the verification has already been completed.



See **Chapter 2** for details on the key considerations that should inform your decisions on how to manage the verification and count.

6.3 All count processes should be transparent, which will help to promote confidence in the count.

6.4 You should 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

6.5 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 votes²⁵.

Sorting and counting

6.6 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 seen²⁶. The ballot papers should be visible at all times to any agents and observers present.

6.7 Counting assistants should sort the ballot papers into votes for each answer to the referendum question (i.e. 'Remain' and 'Leave'). Any doubtful ballot papers should be placed aside for adjudication.

6.8 The number of votes given for each answer should then be counted and placed into bundles of a predetermined number, e.g. bundles of 10, 20, 25, 50 or 100. A slip or card bearing either 'Remain' or 'Leave' 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 re-counted by another counting assistant in order to ensure the accuracy of the bundle.

6.9 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.

6.10 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.

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

Doubtful ballot papers

6.12 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 [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 agents and observers to refer to.

6.13 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

6.14 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 answer to the referendum question is clearly apparent

6.15 The legislation provides that you must reject a ballot paper²⁷:

- that does not bear the official mark (not the unique identifying mark)
- on which a vote is given for both answers to the referendum question
- 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

6.16 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 clear²⁸:

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

6.17 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

6.18 Ballot papers that appear to be altered should be treated as 'doubtful' and put forward for adjudication, where you must decide on their validity in the presence of agents and observers. Those that are subsequently declared as valid must be counted and included in the total number of votes cast for the relevant answer to the referendum question.

6.19 Your decision on any question arising in respect of a ballot paper is final²⁹. You must draw up a statement showing the number of ballot papers rejected and for what reason³⁰. 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
- both answers voted for
- writing or mark by which voter can be identified
- unmarked or void for uncertainty

6.20 You should have regard to the [doubtful ballot booklet](#) and [placemat](#) to ensure accurate and consistent categorisation of rejection for reporting on the statement.

6.21 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 decision³¹. 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.

6.22 You must inform your RCO of the contents of the statement³². Further guidance on the processes and systems for submitting this information will be provided separately by the CCO and your RCO.

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

Cut ballot papers

6.24 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.

6.25 If it does, the ballot paper can be accepted as a valid vote, provided you are satisfied that³³:

- the intention of the voter is clear
- the voter has not voted for more than one answer to the referendum question
- the voter has not made writing or a 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

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

6.27 All of the bundles and part bundles of ballot papers showing a valid vote must be counted. The total for each answer to the referendum question must then be added to the total number of rejected ballot papers³⁴. 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 agents and the RCO on the provisional local total.

6.28 You should be satisfied that the local totals 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 and stacked appropriately.
- Consider recounting the ballot papers in the bundles.

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

6.30 If, following this, the figures still do not reconcile and the discrepancy cannot be identified and rectified, you should contact the RCO to discuss and agree how to proceed.

Provisional local totals and recounts

6.31 While the reconciliation takes place for each 'area', the totals from each of the 'areas' will need to be collated into overall local totals. The provisional local totals must be shared with the referendum and counting agents³⁵.

6.32 You should share the provisional local totals with the referendum and counting agents, and make clear that a referendum agent or designated counting agent present at the completion of the counting is entitled to request a recount³⁶. This process should be undertaken within the framework of maximum openness and transparency implemented throughout the various processes so that all campaigners and agents can have confidence in the processes and the provisional local totals provided.

6.33 You must give agents sufficient time to digest the totals before proceeding further³⁷. It is at this point that any referendum agent or designated counting agent may request to have the votes recounted or, following a recount, recounted again.



The referendum is a single contest with one result for the whole of the UK. Accurate local totals for each voting area are fundamental to an accurate result in which voters can have confidence.

There is no provision for a regional or national recount. Recounts can only take place at voting area level.

When you consult the agents on the provisional local totals, you should make clear that this is their opportunity to request a recount and that there is no provision for regional or national recounts.

You should keep in mind that it is possible that campaigners may get early indications of how the vote is progressing from other count centres, which may lead them to request a recount in your voting area.

6.34 You must consider any recount request but by law may refuse if, in your opinion, the request is unreasonable³⁸. If you receive a request for a recount, you should liaise with the RCO and confirm how you will proceed.

6.35 You may consider offering the agents the opportunity to inspect the bundles of ballot papers as a means of reassuring them that the local totals are accurate.

6.36 The RCO can also direct you to carry out a recount (or further recount) if there is a reason to doubt the accuracy of the counting of votes in your area³⁹.

6.37 If you recount the votes, the referendum and counting agents and any observers in attendance 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).

6.38 The agents must be consulted on the revised provisional local totals in the same way as they were consulted on the provisional local totals at the conclusion of the first count⁴⁰.

6.39 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 unreasonable⁴¹.

6.40 You should keep the RCO informed of what is happening.

6.41 Once you have consulted on the provisional local totals, which includes considering any requests for and undertaking any recount(s), you can proceed to inform the RCO of the local totals⁴².

Communicating the local totals

6.42 You must produce a statement containing⁴³:

- the total number of ballot papers counted
- the total number of votes cast in favour of each answer to the referendum question
- the total number of rejected ballot papers

6.43 You must inform the RCO of the contents of the statement⁴⁴. Further guidance on the processes and systems for producing the statement and for submitting local totals will be provided separately by the CCO and your RCO.

Declaring local totals

6.44 When authorised to do so by the RCO (or CCO in Northern Ireland) you must declare the local totals.

6.45 The following factors should be taken into account when considering the declaration of local totals:

- Decide on the exact location in the venue where public announcements and declarations should take place 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. You could make use of display boards or curtains to provide a suitable backdrop for the announcement of the local totals.
- Any announcement equipment should be in place and checked before the proceedings begin.
- Double-check that the figures you are about to read out are accurate. You may need to repeat the declaration so that those in attendance are able to hear the detail clearly, particularly where there is noise from those attending.
- You should take steps to provide media representatives in attendance with a written copy of the local totals at the time the announcement is made as this will help them to ensure that their transmission of totals is accurate.

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- ¹ Rule 46(13) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ² Rules 45(3) and (4) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³ Rule 45(2) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ⁴ Rule 45(6) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ⁵ Rule 24(1)(b) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ⁶ Rules 45(3)(b) and (5) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ⁷ Rules 45(6) and (7) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ⁸ S6E PPERA 2000
 - ⁹ S6F(7) PPERA 2000
 - ¹⁰ Ss6A and 6B PPERA 2000
 - ¹¹ Rules 45(3)(b) and 5(a) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ¹² Rule 46(9)(a) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ¹³ Rules 55(2) and 46(9)(a) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ¹⁴ Rule 55(2) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ¹⁵ Rule 46 European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ¹⁶ Rule 46(9) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ¹⁷ Rule 46(10) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ¹⁸ Rule 46(9)(a) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ¹⁹ Rule 46(1) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ²⁰ Rule 46(8)(a) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ²¹ Rule 46(9)(a) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ²² Rule 46(1)(c) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ²³ Rules 46(1) and (9) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ²⁴ Rule 46(11)(a) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ²⁵ Rule 46(2) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ²⁶ Rule 46(8) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ²⁷ Rule 48(1) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ²⁸ Rule 48(2) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ²⁹ Rule 50 European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³⁰ Rule 48(4) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³¹ Rule 48(3) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³² Rule 48(5)(a) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³³ Rule 48(2) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³⁴ Rule 49(1)(a) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³⁵ Rule 47(1) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³⁶ Rule 47(1) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³⁷ Rule 47(3) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³⁸ Rule 47(1) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ³⁹ Rule 49(3)(a) and (4) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ⁴⁰ Rule 47(1) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ⁴¹ Rule 47(1) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ⁴² Rule 49(1) and (2) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ⁴³ Rules 49(1) and 44(4) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016
 - ⁴⁴ Rules 49(2)(a) and 44(5)(a) European Union Referendum (Conduct) Regulations 2016