

Part E – Verifying and counting the votes

Police and Crime Commissioner
elections in England on 5 May 2016:
guidance for Local Returning Officers

Published December 2015 (last updated March 2016)

In this guidance we use 'must' when we refer to a specific legal requirement. We use 'should' for items we consider to be recommended practice, but which are not legal requirements.

Translations and other formats

For information on obtaining this publication in another language or in a large-print or Braille version please contact the Electoral Commission:

Tel: 020 7271 0500

Email: publications@electoralcommission.org.uk

Updates to this document

Updated	Description of change	Paragraph number
February 2016	Added chapters 4 - 6	N/A
February 2016	Added paragraph 6.5 to clarify mixing process if starting the count prior to completion of verification.	6.5
March 2016	Re-published to include legal references.	N/A

Contents

1	Principles for an effective verification and count	1
2	Preparing for the verification and count.....	3
	Planning for the verification and count.....	4
	Timing of the verification and count.....	4
	Staffing and training.....	5
	Layout and equipment at the verification and count venue(s)	5
	Communicating during the verification and count.....	6
	Managing attendees	8
	Ensuring the security of ballot papers.....	8
3	Attendance at the verification and count.....	10
	Who can attend?	10
	Controlling admission	11
	Counting agents	11
	Accredited observers.....	12
	Commission representatives	12
	The media	12
4	Receipt of polling station materials and sealed boxes of postal ballot papers	14
	Receipt of sealed boxes of postal ballot papers	15
5	Verification	16
6	The count.....	20
	Counting the votes.....	20
	Mixing.....	20
	Sorting and counting.....	20
	Doubtful ballot papers.....	22
	Reconciliation	25
	Provisonal local totals and recounts	26
	Equality of votes	27
	Declaring the local totals	27

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 box has been recounted at least twice, until the same number of ballot papers is counted on two consecutive occasions
- The count produces an accurate result, whereⁱ:
 - at the first count, the total number of first preference votes cast for each candidate and rejected votes matches the total number of ballot papers given on the verification statement for the election.
 - at the second count, where required, the ballot papers on which a first preference vote was given to those candidates who did not remain in the contest equals: the total number of ballot papers containing a valid second preference vote for a continuing candidate, plus the total number of ballot papers containing a second preference vote for a candidate not remaining in the contest, plus the rejected ballot papers at the second count.
- 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.

ⁱ In the case of an election with two candidates, the count produces an accurate result where the total number of votes cast for each candidate and rejected votes matches the total number of ballot papers given on the verification statement for the election.

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 venues
- cost
- transparency for candidates, agents and observers

1.3 You will also need to take into account any guidance or directions from the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO).



Guidance for PAROs on the verification, count and results collation is included in our [Guidance for Police Area Returning Officers: Delivery of key processes](#). Guidance for PAROs on planning for the election is included in our PARO our [PARO Planning guidance](#) document.

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.

2.2 There are a variety of methods for arranging verification and count processes and it is for you as LRO, in discussion with the PARO, to decide which approach is most appropriate for your local circumstances.

2.3 If you are also the PARO, you should be satisfied that the verification plans of in police area are designed and managed sufficiently to secure an accurate result in which everyone can have confidence.

2.4 In either case, your project plan should include your arrangements for the management of the verification and counts.



This guidance should be read alongside our [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.

We recognise that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach which can be applied to running the verification and count process at an election. 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 we have developed 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.

2.5 As LRO, you are responsible for the verification and counting of the votes for your voting area (unless the PARO has given notice that they will take on responsibility for this) and the transmission of the local total for the voting area to the PARO.

2.6 If you are also the PARO, you are responsible for the collation and calculation of votes given for each candidate across the PCC voting area and the declaration of the result. You may also give notice that you are taking on the responsibility for the counting of the votes.



Information about roles and responsibilities can be found in [Part A – Role and responsibilities](#) of the Commission’s guidance and in our [PARO Planning guidance](#) document.

Planning for the verification and count

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

2.8 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 election.

You should review your assumptions to ensure they continue to be realistic and robust, including your assumptions on turnout, the number of candidates, 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 plans for the verification and count, you should, as a minimum, share information on your plan with local political parties, elected representatives and prospective candidates. To help manage expectations you should also identify in advance those decisions about the management of the count to be taken in consultation or agreement with candidates and agents, and make clear to them on what basis you will be making decisions. This may include, for example, decisions on recounts and the suspension of the count. While you should seek input from those affected or interested to inform your decision-making, ultimately the responsibility for making decisions remains with you.

Timing of the verification and count

2.10 Our [timing of election counts report](#) sets out the overarching principle that should underpin decision-making in relation to the timing of election counts, that is, the need to ensure an accurate result in which voters, candidates and political parties have confidence.

2.11 You are required to make arrangements for the verification and counting of the votes as soon as practicable after the close of poll¹ The PARO can direct as to the time by which the verification of ballot papers must begin and you should engage with the PARO at an early stage to discuss and develop timings for all of the verification and count processes.

2.12 You should engage with local political parties, candidates and agents as part of your decision-making process so that there is a well-informed local dialogue about the timing of the count in the context of the local circumstances. Decisions on the timing of the count should be taken before the notice of election is published and those with an interest, including local political parties and broadcasters, should be informed at an early stage.

2.13 There may well be an expectation among candidates, parties and the media that the results will be declared as soon as possible after the close of poll. Working closely with the PARO, you will need to plan carefully how to manage the expectations of candidates, parties and the media.

2.14 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 an accurate result in which voters, candidates and agents can have confidence.

2.15 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 candidates and agents, as well as the PARO, informed of progress at the count.

Staffing and training

2.16 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.



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standard 1](#), you will need to put in place appropriate resources to ensure the verification and count are timely.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be met you will need to set out how the verification and count is to be organised and managed, including the process you followed to arrive at your decision.



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(s)

2.17 Layout plans of your verification and count venue(s) should also be prepared. A good layout 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.

2.18 So that those attending the count can have confidence that the count process is well-managed and can have confidence in the result, you should 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.

2.19 You should ensure that all equipment, including the equipment to be used to transmit information and local totals to the PARO, 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.



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



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standard 2](#), you will need to ensure count 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.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be delivered you will need to have in place a layout plan of the count and have in place information to be provided to attendees at the count.

Communicating during the verification and count

2.20 Good communication, both at candidate and agent briefings in advance of the verification and count and at the event itself, allows those present to properly scrutinise all of the processes and will help to build confidence. Providing information on the processes to be followed can also help to lower the number of queries raised by candidates and agents – in particular from new or inexperienced candidates or agents – thus reducing the pressure on staff.

2.21 You should, for example, produce and distribute an information pack to anyone attending the count. You should liaise with the PARO to ensure that the pack also includes relevant information on how the PCC result will be calculated and declared.

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

2.23 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.

2.24 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.



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standard 2](#), you will need to ensure that count 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.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be delivered you will need to have a layout plan of the count and have in place information to be provided to attendees at the count and arrangements to communicate progress at the count.

2.25 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 candidates, 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, with an indication of the level at which the information will be provided (e.g. ward level / polling district level) – to be followed by provision of the actual verification statement and statement 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 Returning Officers](#)'.

Managing attendees

2.26 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.

2.27 You should ensure that all attendees at the count, including candidates, their guests, election 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.

2.28 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.

2.29 Tickets or admission passes should be issued to everyone entitled to attend the count, except for 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.

2.30 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 – Attendance at the verification and count** for further guidance on who is entitled to attend the verification and count.

Ensuring the security of ballot papers



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standard 1](#), you will need to maintain the secure storage of ballot papers at all times.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be delivered you will need to have in place arrangements for securely storing ballot papers.

2.31 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 results, particularly where ballot papers need to be transported from the verification to the count or where there is a break in proceedings which means the ballot papers need to be stored between the conclusion of the verification and the commencement of the count.

2.32 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 boxes. You should always open the sealed ballot boxes in clear view of any candidates and agents present, so they can satisfy themselves that nobody has interfered with the ballot papers and the ballot boxes.

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

2.34 You should also brief candidates 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 Returning Officers](#)'.

3 Attendance at the verification and count



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standard 2](#), you will need to ensure count 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.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be delivered you will need to have a layout plan of the count, and have in place information to be provided to attendees at the count and arrangements to communicate progress at the count.

Who can attend?

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

- you and your staff
- the PARO and their staff
- candidates
- one guest per candidate
- election agents (or a sub-agent on their behalf)
- counting agents
- Commission representatives
- accredited observers
- any other person permitted by you as LRO to attend (see paragraph 3.5 below)²

3.2 You must give counting agents appointed notification of the time and place at which the verification and counting of votes will start and, where applicable, notice of the time and place at which the count of the second preference votes will begin if required³.

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 attendeesⁱⁱ are provided with a copy of the [secrecy requirements](#)⁵.

3.5 There is no requirement for those attending to arrive by a certain time, and so those entitled to attend should be admitted whenever they arrive. Also, 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 election agents in advance or thought it impracticable to do so⁶.

Controlling admission

3.7 You should provide lists of those people 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 information⁷. In particular, where votes are counted by sorting the ballot papers according to candidate and then counting each set of ballot papers, the counting agents are entitled to satisfy themselves that the ballot papers are correctly sorted⁸.

ⁱⁱ The law does not extend this requirement to police officers on duty.

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 to limit the number of observers present at any one time, and this discretion must be exercised reasonably.

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 practices¹⁰. 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 count.

The media

3.14 You should include space and opportunity for the media to report on the results of the election. You have discretion to decide which representatives of the media you allow to attend¹¹. As with all attendees, you must ensure that media representatives do not interfere with the process or compromise the secrecy of the vote¹².

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 electoral questions.

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 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 should abide by any decision that you make on the use of mobile telephones, cameras and other recording equipment.



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

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



To be able to achieve the outcome set out in [performance standards 1 and 2](#), you will need to ensure count processes are designed and managed to secure an accurate result, with a clear audit trail.

To demonstrate that the outcome can be delivered you will need to have in place arrangements to maintain a clear audit trail of the count processes.

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 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 process¹³. 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 account¹⁴.

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 proxies. 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 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 verification in the same way as any ballot box from a polling station¹⁵. 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

5.1 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 should reconcile. You should keep both purposes in mind when conducting the verification process.

5.2 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](#).

5.3 The verification of the used, unused and spoilt ballot papers is a legal requirement¹⁶, and is central to the declaration of an accurate result.

5.4 You must verify each ballot paper account and draw up a statement as to the result of the verification¹⁷. 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.

5.5 Any agent present at the verification may make a copy of the statement¹⁸, you should make available copies for the agents present once the verification has been completed and you should, on request, supply a copy of the statement to any agent present. The verification statement is a key communication tool that will help to ensure that candidates and agents are confident that the processes at the verification and count are transparent and that they will produce an accurate result.

5.6 Where there are multiple polling stations in a polling place, the ballot boxes should be verified simultaneously at adjacent tables or one after the other at the same table. The law provides that a ballot paper shall not be rendered invalid simply because it has been put in the 'wrong' box. You should therefore ensure that you have in place a procedure to move transparently any ballot papers which have been placed in the 'wrong' ballot box by electors to the correct ballot box during verification.

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 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 packet¹⁹. The packets of spoilt ballot papers must also be opened and the number of papers must be counted²⁰. Both unused and spoilt ballot paper packets must be resealed after they have been counted²¹.

- b. Staff must break the seals and open the ballot boxes in the presence of any counting agents and observers that are present²². 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. The ballot papers must be kept face up at all times during the verification and count²³.
- d. You should ensure that the empty box is shown to the agents and observers so that they can be satisfied that it is indeed empty. 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.
- e. The total given on the ballot paper account must be compared against the number of ballot papers counted and recorded as being present inside the ballot box²⁴. You must compare the unused and spoilt ballot papers, as well as the tendered votes list, against the figures on the ballot paper account²⁵. 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.

5.9 If a ballot paper account does not reconcile, 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 a different box or in a box from 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, recount 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 recounted 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.

5.10 Verification can only be completed once postal ballot papers, including those received at polling stations, have been opened and processed, and have been through the verification process²⁶.

5.11 You must ensure that the verification statement containing the result of the verification of each ballot box is completed²⁷. The statement must in each case include the total number of postal ballot papers and the total number of ballot papers verified for the poll²⁸. You should sign the statement and any agent present may make a copy of the statement as to the result of the verification²⁹. You should make copies available for the agents present once verification has been completed and you should, on request, supply a copy of the statements to any agent present.

5.12 You must send a copy of the statement to the PARO. The PARO will provide you with guidance on how this should be done³⁰.

5.13 If, on completion of the verification, you do not proceed immediately to the counting of the votes, you should place the ballot papers and other documents in secure packets under your own seal and the seals of any agents present who wish to affix their own seals. You should take all necessary steps to ensure the security of the ballot papers and the relevant stationery during any break in the verification and count proceedings.

5.14 You should take all necessary steps to ensure the security of the ballot papers and the relevant stationery during any break in the verification and count proceedings.

5.15 Where the PCC count is to take place at a different venue to the verification, you must place all the verified ballot papers into secure packets, such as ballot boxes, for transportation to the count venue³¹. These packets must be marked with the name of your voting area and the name of the police

area³². You may need to liaise with the PARO regarding specific arrangements for transporting verified ballot papers to the count venue. In addition, you must produce a record of all the packets of verified ballot papers that you are transporting to the PCC count venue and the contents of each of these³³. You must deliver this record, the ballot paper accounts and the final statement as to the result of the verification to the PCC count venue along with the packets of verified ballot papers³⁴.

5.16 You should agree with the PARO the arrangements, including the names of the personnel involved, for the delivery of the packets for the PCC election. Once the packets of verified ballot papers have arrived at the count venue the PARO may require you to verify the contents of each packet before the counting of these votes is commenced.

5.17 Further guidance on ensuring the security of ballot boxes can be found in paragraph **2.31** above and our verification and count resource '[Planning for an effective verification and count: a toolkit for Returning Officers](#)'.

6 The count

Counting the votes

6.1 The counting of votes must begin as soon as practicable after the close of poll³⁵. At a standalone PCC election, you do not have to wait until you have completed the verification before you can start counting the votes.

6.2 Where there has been a break in proceedings - for example where the counting of votes does not immediately follow verification - all sealed boxes should be opened in full view of any candidates and agents that are present. When a box has a seal attached by an agent, particular care should be taken to show to any agents present that this seal is still intact prior to it being broken.

6.3 All count processes should be transparent. 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

6.4 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 ordinary ballot box before sorting and counting the votes³⁶.

6.5 In addition, if you are starting the counting of votes before the completion of the verification process, you should ensure that you always have one box containing verified ballot papers available at the end of the verification process for that contest, so that you can comply with the requirement for mixing the ballot papers from one ballot box with the contents of another.

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 seen³⁷. The ballot papers should be visible at all times to any candidates, agents and observers present.

PCC election with only two candidates

6.7 Counting assistants should sort the ballot papers into votes for each candidate. Any doubtful ballot papers should be placed aside for adjudication.

6.8 The number of votes given for each candidate should then be counted and placed into bundles of a predetermined number, e.g. bundles of 20, 25, 50 or 100. A slip or card bearing the candidate's name, 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 recounted by another counting assistant in order to ensure the accuracy of the bundle.

6.9 Before removing any bundles from the counting assistants, 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.

PCC election with three or more candidates

6.11 If there are three or more candidates, the Police and Crime Commissioner is elected using the Supplementary Vote (SV) electoral system. In the SV system, voters can cast a first and second preference vote for the Police and Crime Commissioner.

6.12 At the **first count**, only the first preference votes are counted.³⁸

6.13 At the end of the first count, you must inform the PARO of your local totals³⁹. The PARO will then collate the totals for the whole of the police area. If a candidate obtains more than 50% of the total number of valid first preference votes across the whole of the police area, they will be declared elected. If no candidate obtains more than 50% of the total number of valid first preference votes across the whole of the police area, the top two candidates (or more if there is a tie) remain in the contest while the rest are eliminated. The PARO will inform you whether a second count is needed⁴⁰.

6.14 You will not be able to ascertain with certainty which candidates will remain in the contest until the PARO has calculated the totals for the whole of the police area. Your voting area may have strong support for a candidate that is then eliminated once all the local totals have been collated. This should be kept in mind when taking any actions in preparation for the second count.

6.15 In preparation for the **second count**, you will need to sort the ballot papers into:

- ballot papers on which a first preference vote was given to one of the candidates remaining in the contest – these **are not counted again** at the second count
- ballot papers rejected at the first count
- all other ballot papers containing a valid first preference vote, sorted by
 - those containing a second preference vote for one of the continuing candidates, sorted by candidate
 - those containing a second preference vote for a candidate who is not continuing in the contest (these do not form part of the

- second count, but the total number of ballot papers should be counted for audit purposes and packaged separately)
- those ballot papers requiring adjudication

6.16 You must then count all ballot papers containing valid second preference votes for the continuing candidates⁴¹.

6.17 At the end of the second count, you must inform the PARO of your local totals⁴². The PARO will then collate the totals for the second count for the whole of the police area, and add these to the total number of first preference votes each of those candidates received. The candidate with the highest total number of votes will be declared elected, and the PARO will inform you of the result.

Doubtful ballot papers

6.18 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.

6.19 You should have regard to the Commission's [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.

6.20 Examples of allowed and rejected ballot papers are also set out on the doubtful ballot papers placemats which you should have on display at the count for candidates, agents and observers to refer to. There are different versions of the doubtful ballot paper placemats as set out below:

- [two candidates](#)
- three or more candidates - [standard placemat](#)
- three or more candidates - supplementary placemats to support counting assistants identifying valid first and second votes - [simple allowed](#) and [first preference only](#)

6.21 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

6.22 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
 - at a PCC election with only two candidates, a vote for one candidate is clearly apparent
 - at a PCC election with more than two candidates:

- at the first count, a first preference vote for one candidate is clearly apparent
- at the second count, a second preference vote for one candidate is clearly apparent

6.23 At the **first count**, the legislation provides that you must reject a ballot paper which⁴³:

- does not bear the official mark (not the unique identifying mark)
- contains more than one first preference vote
- has any writing or mark by which the voter can be identified (except the printed ballot paper number or other unique identifying mark), or
- is unmarked
- is void for uncertainty as to the first preference vote⁴⁴

6.24 Only ballot papers with a valid first preference vote can move forward to the second preference count⁴⁵.

6.25 At the **second count**, you must reject a ballot paper which⁴⁶:

- does not contain the official mark (not the unique identifying mark)
- contains more than one second preference vote
- has any writing or mark by which the voter can be identified (except the printed ballot paper number or other unique identifying mark)
- is unmarked as to the second preference vote
- is void for uncertainty as to the second preference vote⁴⁷

6.26 However, in all cases, 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 clear⁴⁸:

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

6.27 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

6.28 Ballot papers that appear to be altered, either with a clearly different writing instrument or with correction fluid, should be treated as 'doubtful' and put forward for adjudication, where you must decide on their validity in the presence of candidates, agents and observers. Those that are subsequently declared as valid must be counted and included in the total number of votes cast for the appropriate candidate⁴⁹.

6.29 Your decision on any question arising in respect of a ballot paper is final and can only be challenged by way of an election petition⁵⁰. A statement of rejected ballot papers must be prepared after the first count, and if there is a second count, at the end of the second count⁵¹.

6.30 You should therefore have a system in place throughout the adjudication process for sorting the rejected ballot papers into the following headings:

PCC election with only two candidates⁵²:

- want of official mark
- writing or mark by which voter could be identified
- unmarked or void for uncertainty
- on which votes are given for more than one candidate

PCC election with three or more candidates⁵³

- want of the official mark
- writing or mark by which voter can be identified
- void for uncertainty
- at the **first count**⁵⁴:
 - voting for more than one candidate as to the first preference vote
 - unmarked as to the first preference vote
- at the **second count**⁵⁵:
 - voting for more than one candidate as to the second preference vote
 - unmarked as to the second preference vote

6.31 You should have regard to the Commission's guidance and any additional guidance issued by the PARO to ensure accurate and consistent categorisation of rejection for reporting on the statements.

6.32 Each rejected ballot paper must have the word 'rejected' marked on it,⁵⁶ and the words 'rejection objected to' must be added if a counting agent objects to your decision⁵⁷. Although observers should be able to observe this process, unlike agents, they do not have the right to object to the rejection of a ballot paper.

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

Cut ballot papers

6.34 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.

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

- the intention of the voter is clear
- none of the grounds for rejection apply



See Chapter 6 of [Part D: Absent voting](#) for guidance on how to deal with cut ballot papers at postal vote openings.

Reconciliation

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

6.37 You should be satisfied that any 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.
- Consider recounting the ballot papers in the bundles.

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

Reconciliation at a PCC election with only two candidates

6.39 All of the bundles and part bundles of ballot papers showing a valid vote for each candidate must be counted⁵⁸. The total for each candidate should then be added to the total number of rejected ballot papers, and this figure should match exactly the figure giving the total number of ballot papers obtained at the end of the verification process.

6.40 If the figures agree, you should proceed to the process of consulting the PARO on the provisional local total as well as informing the candidates and agents present. The PARO will advise you of the processes that are in place for considering the provisional local total and dealing with requests for recounts.

6.41 If the figures do not agree, you should follow the procedure in paragraphs **6.36** and **6.37** above.

Reconciliation at a PCC election with three or more candidates

6.42 At the **first count**, all of the bundles and part bundles of ballot papers showing a valid first preference vote for each candidate must be counted⁵⁹. The total for each candidate should then be added to the total number of rejected ballot papers, and 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 PARO on the provisional local total as well as informing the candidates and agents present. The PARO will advise you of the processes that are in place for considering the provisional local total and dealing with requests for recounts.

6.43 At the **second count**, where required, all of the bundles and part bundles of ballot papers showing valid second preference votes for each remaining candidate must be counted⁶⁰. The ballot papers on which a first preference vote was given to those candidates who did not remain in the contest should equal: the total number of ballot papers containing a valid second preference vote, plus the total number of ballot papers containing a second preference vote for a candidate not remaining in the contest, plus the rejected ballot papers at the second count.

6.44 If the figures reconcile, you should proceed to the process of consulting the PARO on the provisional local total as well as informing the candidates and agents present. The PARO will advise you of the processes that are in place for considering the provisional local total and dealing with requests for recounts.

6.45 If at any point the figures do not agree, you should follow the procedure in paragraphs **6.36** and **6.37** above.

Provisional local totals and recounts

6.46 You should be satisfied that the number of votes for each candidate is accurate before proceeding to a provisional local total.

6.47 All processes should be undertaken within the framework of maximum openness and transparency implemented throughout the various stages of the count so that all candidates and agents can have confidence in the processes and the provisional totals provided.

6.48 Once satisfied, you should proceed to the process of consulting the PARO on the provisional local total as well as informing the candidates and agents present at the conclusion of each count and seek agreement before moving on to the next count or declaring the local totals, as appropriate. The PARO will advise you of the processes that are in place for considering the provisional local total and dealing with requests for recounts, or the PARO may direct you to recount the votes after being informed of the provisional local totals if they have reason to doubt the accuracy of the counting of the votes in your area. If a recount has been directed, once that recount is complete, the provisional local total process should begin again. You should make clear to the candidates and agents that first preference votes can only be recounted at the first count; only the second preference votes can be recounted at the second count.

6.49 You must give the candidates and agents sufficient time to digest the provisional local totals before proceeding to the next stage of the process⁶¹. It

is at this point that candidates and agents may request to have the votes recounted or, following a recount, recounted again⁶².

6.50 You must consider any recount request but may refuse if, in your opinion, the request is unreasonable⁶³. You may, however, consider offering the candidates and agents the opportunity to inspect the bundles of the ballot papers as a means of reassuring them that the local total is accurate.

6.51 If you agree to recount the votes⁶⁴, the candidates and agents present 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)⁶⁵.

6.52 The candidates and agents should be consulted on the revised provisional totals in the same way as they were consulted on the provisional totals at the conclusion of the original count.

6.53 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 unreasonable⁶⁶.

Equality of votes

6.54 At a PCC election, if two or more candidates at the end of either the first count or second count have polled the same number of votes in the voting area, there is no requirement for the LRO to draw lots. You should explain to the candidates and agents that the totals for the voting area will be transmitted to the PARO for inclusion in the calculation of the result for the police area.

Declaring the local totals

6.55 As LRO, you must prepare a statement at the conclusion of each count⁶⁷. At the **first count**, this statement must include the total number of first preference votes, the number of first preference votes given for each candidate, the total number of ballot papers used and the number of rejected ballot papers under each heading⁶⁸. At the **second count**, this statement must include the number of second preference votes given to each remaining candidate and the number of rejected votes under each heading⁶⁹. You must provide each statement to the PARO and declare the local totals at the end of each count once you have been authorised to do so by the PARO⁷⁰.

6.56 The following factors should be taken into account when making declarations:

- Decide on the exact location in the venue where public announcements and declarations will take place and who will be on the platform at these times. The platform should be accessible for all those who need to get

up on it. You could make use of display boards to provide a suitable backdrop for the announcement of local totals.

- Any announcement equipment should be in place and checked before the proceedings begin.
- Double-check that the local total is accurate, and that it is written in the form of words for oral delivery in order to avoid any errors. 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 figures is accurate.

6.57 When a candidate has used their commonly used name, you should use both their full name and their commonly used name when declaring the local totals.

6.58 Once a result is declared, it is final and cannot be amended. The power to correct procedural errors does not empower you to correct an incorrect result once it has been declared.



Further guidance on giving public notice after the election is provided [in Part F – After the declaration of result.](#)

¹ Rules 48(1) and 51(1) of the PCC Elections Rules (Schedule 3 to the Police and Crime Commissioner Elections Order 2012). All subsequent references to rules are references to those rules.

² Rules 48(3) and (4) and 51(3) and (4).

³ Rule 48(2).

⁴ Rules 48(6) and 51(6).

⁵ Rule 32(1)(b).

⁶ Rules 48(5) and 51(5).

⁷ Rules 48(6) and 51(6).

⁸ Rule 51(7).

⁹ Section 6F(7)(c) PPERA.

¹⁰ Sections 6A and 6B PPERA; rules 48(4)(f) and 51(4)(f).

¹¹ Rules 48(3)(b) and 51(3)(b).

¹² Rules 48(5) and 51(5)(a).

¹³ Rule 49(5).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rule 49(1)(c).

¹⁶ Rule 49(1)(b) and (5).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Rule 49(7)

19 Rule 49(5).
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Rule 49(1)(a).
23 Rule 52(5).
24 Rule 49(5).
25 Ibid.
26 Rule 49(1)(c),
27 Rule 49(5)(b).
28 Rule 49(1)(c) and (5)(b).
29 Rule 49(7).
30 Rule 49(6).
31 Rule 50(2).
32 Rule 50(2).
33 Rule 50(2)(b).
34 Rule 50(2).
35 Rule 51(1).
36 Rule 52(2).
37 Rule 49(3).
38 Rule 52(3).
39 Rule 57.
40 Rule 60(1).
41 Rule 60.
42 Rule 61.
43 Rule 53(1), PCC Elections Rules.
44 Rule 53(1), PCC Elections Rules.
45 Rule 60(3), PCC Elections Rules.
46 Rules 53(1) and 60(3) to (5), PCC Elections Rules.
47 Rules 53(1) and 60(3) to (5), PCC Elections Rules.
48 Rule 53(2) to (4).
49 Rule 53(2).
50 Rule 56.
51 Rule 53(7).
52 Rule 53(1).
53 Rule 53(1).
54 Rule 53(1).
55 Rule 53(1).
56 Rule 53(6).
57 Rule 53(6).
58 Rule 52(3).
59 Rule 52(3).
60 Rule 60(2)(b), PCC Elections Rules.
61 Rule 54(4).
62 Rule 54.
63 Rule 54(2).
64 Rule 55.
65 *Fermanagh and South Tyrone* [2010] NIQB 113 (Morgan LCJ at paragraph 43).
66 Rule 54
67 Rule 57(1), PCC Elections Rules.
68 Rule 57(1), PCC Elections Rules.
69 Rule 57(1), PCC Elections Rules.
70 Rule 57(2), PCC Elections Rules.