

Part D – The poll

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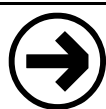
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1 Polling day issues for the (Acting) Returning Officer and staff

Introduction

1.1 The Electoral Commission has produced a *Handbook for polling station staff* designed to assist Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks. It covers the procedures involved in managing a polling station and should be referred to for any questions relating to the duties of polling station staff.

1.2 This part of the guidance manual does not replicate the content of that handbook, but instead aims to cover the key issues that affect Electoral Registration Officers, (Acting) Returning Officers and electoral administrators on polling day.



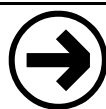
A copy of the *Handbook for polling station staff* and a range of polling station support products can be downloaded from the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/uk-parliamentary-elections.

Hours of poll

1.3 The hours of poll for UK Parliamentary general elections, and for any elections where the polls have been combined, are **7am** to **10pm**.

Public enquiries

1.4 In the weeks leading up to polling day, the (Acting) Returning Officer's staff can expect to receive a number of enquiries from members of the public, ranging from people who do not know where their polling station is to queries about electoral registration matters.



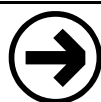
To be prepared to deal with this volume of enquiries the Commission recommends that (Acting) Returning Officers set up a dedicated enquiries team. See Section 13, 'Communication' in *Essentials of effective election management: planning for a UK Parliamentary general election* for more information.

1.5 One of the most frequent enquiries on polling day is likely to be from members of the public who arrive at a polling station and find that they do not appear on the electoral register and are therefore unable to vote. If they have either not made an application for registration or have not submitted an application in time to be added to the register for the elections, Presiding Officers could be instructed to offer to forward the person's contact details to the Electoral Registration Officer so that a rolling registration form can be sent to them. Alternatively, Presiding Officers could be supplied with rolling registration forms to provide directly to any such people. (Acting) Returning Officers should liaise with the relevant Electoral Registration Officer(s) to agree the process to be followed.

1.6 If a person is insistent that they have made an application to the Electoral Registration Officer to register to vote, Presiding Officers should be instructed to direct any such person to the relevant Electoral Registration Officer because the electoral register can be amended up to 9pm on polling day in the event of a clerical error.¹ Further information on clerical errors can be found in Section 3, 'The register of electors'.

1.7 The (Acting) Returning Officer's staff can also expect to receive many and varied enquiries from electors, candidates, agents and party activists, and polling station staff. The (Acting) Returning Officer should ensure that they have in place arrangements to deal with enquiries, which may include training relevant staff and providing them with a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs).

1.8 It is particularly important to anticipate any enquiries that may arise in relation to the changes to the voting procedure which have come into effect since the last UK Parliamentary general election, for example concerns about the secrecy of the ballot as a result of the use of the corresponding number list, which contains both the ballot paper number and the elector number.



A template of FAQs for polling station staff is contained in the *Handbook for polling station staff*.

Emergency proxy applications



An elector may appoint a proxy up to **5pm** on polling day, if they became ill or disabled after 5pm on the sixth working day before polling day, i.e. they could not have applied for an absent vote under the normal procedure.

1.9 The (Acting) Returning Officer will need to alert polling station staff to this possibility and liaise with Electoral Registration Officers to set up procedures for receiving applications on polling day and for contacting Presiding Officers should any applications be granted after the list of proxies has been despatched to the polling station.

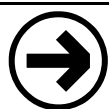
1.10 The application must be made to the Electoral Registration Officer. If the application is made on polling day, or after the list of proxies has been despatched to the polling station, it will be necessary to find a way to communicate the information to the Presiding Officer at the polling station where the proxy will be voting, as clearly the emergency proxy will not be on the list of proxies originally supplied.

1.11 We recommend that wherever possible the proxy of any voter whose application has been accepted should be given a letter authorising them to act as a proxy, which should include details of the person for whom they are voting. The proxy should be instructed to take that authorisation with them when they go to vote and hand it to the Presiding Officer. The letter can then

¹ Section 13B, RPA 1983, as amended by RPA 1985 and RPA 2000.

be retained with the list of proxies as a record that the proxy has been issued with a ballot paper.

1.12 Every effort should be made to contact the appropriate Presiding Officer directly to advise them that an emergency proxy has been appointed, particularly as there is no requirement in law that the proxy must provide any documentation in order to be permitted to vote on behalf of the elector who is ill or disabled. Wherever possible, it is recommended that a supplementary list of proxies be issued to the polling station, which should then be added to the list originally supplied.

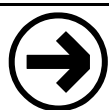


(Acting) Returning Officers should provide Presiding Officers with some application forms which electors who have suffered a medical emergency after 5pm on the sixth working day before the poll can use to apply for an emergency proxy. This prevents the elector having to locate a form and expedites the process for both the elector and the Electoral Registration Officer. The Commission has provided downloadable forms on its website at www.aboutmyvote.co.uk.

Further information on emergency proxy applications is provided in *Managing electoral registration in Great Britain: guidance for Electoral Registration Officers*, Part G, 'Absent voting', Section 4, 'Proxy voting'.

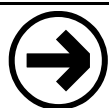
Replacements for lost or spoilt postal ballot packs

1.13 Postal voters and postal proxy voters can apply to the (Acting) Returning Officer for a replacement postal ballot pack up to 5pm on polling day if they have not received a postal ballot pack, or have lost or spoilt some or all of the contents. In addition, replacement postal ballot packs may be issued to those electors or proxies appearing on the list of postal or postal proxy voters but who claim never to have applied for a postal vote and who have not received one.



The Commission has produced a template form on which the details of any elector or proxy claiming not to have applied for a postal vote may be recorded, and which includes a space for electors or proxies to sign. Completion of this form, although not required, would provide a signature which could then be checked against the original absent vote application form after the election, and forwarded to the police, if appropriate. This template form is available to download from the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/uk-parliamentary-elections.

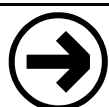
1.14 As replacements can only be issued by hand from 5pm on the day before polling day, trained staff need to be available on polling day to deal with these requests and any associated queries. It is important to make sure that these staff members are able to advise on the forms of identification that the elector will be required to present when applying for a replacement postal ballot pack.



Further advice on these forms of identification and the general process of issuing replacement postal ballot packs can be found in Part C, 'Absent voting', Section 6, 'Replacement postal votes'.

Polling station visits

1.15 We strongly recommend that (Acting) Returning Officers put in place arrangements to have relevant officers visit and inspect polling stations on their behalf. Although the exact nature of these visits is for (Acting) Returning Officers to determine, they can be used for a number of purposes, such as to check that all the notices inside and outside polling booths are properly displayed and that polling booths have been set up in a way that ensures people can mark their vote in secret. These visits could also be used to make an assessment of accessibility issues and to answer any enquiries that Presiding Officers may have.



An accessibility checklist for polling stations can be found in the Appendix, 'Resources', and in the *Handbook for polling station staff*.

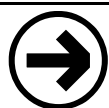
1.16 Visiting officers could also carry with them spare equipment, stationery and other items such as forms, envelopes and copies of the register of electors, in case of any problems at polling stations, e.g. shortages or missing items, or non-working stamping instruments (if being used).

1.17 Postal votes can be returned by hand to the polling station throughout polling day, so (Acting) Returning Officers may use these polling station visits to collect any such postal votes. (Acting) Returning Officers should collect postal votes throughout polling day and open these at postal vote opening sessions throughout the day to minimise the number to be dealt with after the close of poll.

1.18 It is important to ensure that postal votes removed from the polling station before the close of poll are transmitted in a secure manner and that there is a clear audit trail. For example, postal votes should be transported in a sealed packet and a log used to record the number of postal vote envelopes removed, together with the time of collection and the details of the person who collected them.

Responding to emergencies

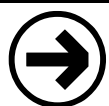
1.19 Various emergencies may occur on polling day, e.g. a fire at a polling station, a Presiding Officer running out of ballot papers or polling station staff being taken ill. The (Acting) Returning Officer will have previously developed a series of contingency plans to deal with such emergencies.



Section 4 of *Essentials of effective election management: planning for a UK Parliamentary general election* provides further information on risk management that should be undertaken as part of the election planning process. The Commission has also developed a template risk register as part of the UK Parliamentary general election template plans, which is available for download from the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/uk-parliamentary-elections.

1.20 It is important that (Acting) Returning Officers make clear to Presiding Officers whom they should contact in the event of an emergency. They should be provided with at least one contact telephone number for the election office, which should be staffed throughout polling day. Staff based in the election office should have mobile phone numbers for any visiting officers, particularly as they may be closest to any polling station in which an emergency has occurred and so may be best placed to respond quickly.

1.21 Presiding Officers should also be given a contact number for the police. Polling stations may be visited by police during polling hours.



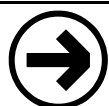
The exchange of contact details between visiting police officers and Presiding Officers should be encouraged. Every police officer should have a pocket guide covering electoral integrity issues on which the details of the Presiding Officer may be noted.

Further details on promoting electoral integrity and establishing contacts with the police are available in Section 18 of *Essentials of effective election management: planning for a UK Parliamentary general election* and on the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/integrity-guidance/electoral-events.

2 Managing the polling station

Briefings for polling station staff

2.1 All polling station staff should be required to attend a briefing session shortly before polling day. This session should give Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks all the information that they require to run the poll, including any relevant local information.



Several resources to support the training of polling station staff are available on the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/uk-parliamentary-elections.

2.2 A particular issue that training for polling station staff should cover include ensuring that Presiding Officers are advised on how to fill in the ballot paper account correctly. A correctly completed ballot paper account is the foundation of an accurate verification and count, and it is therefore essential that Presiding Officers are adequately trained.



The ballot paper account should contain the following:

- total number of ordinary ballot papers issued to the Presiding Officer
- number of ballot papers issued (usually via a calculation made on the account)
- number of unused ballot papers
- number of spoilt ballot papers
- number of and use of tendered ballot papers

2.3 Training for polling station staff should also include information on access issues and procedures including the use of the tactile voting device. While any training or briefing session should cover disability access issues, access to the electoral process for all electors is of key importance. Not every elector will have the same needs and so polling station staff should be trained to focus on customer service and address any requirements on an individual basis. An accessibility checklist can be found in the Appendix, 'Resources'.

2.4 Evaluation of all briefing sessions should be carried out in order to gauge their effectiveness. One possible method of evaluation would be to require all attendees to complete a questionnaire, either at the conclusion of the session or perhaps after the close of poll, when staff will be in a position to determine whether their briefing had equipped them to carry out their duties successfully on polling day. The findings of such an evaluation could then be used to inform the development of any future training programme for polling station staff.



As part of the Commission's performance standards framework, (Acting) Returning Officers are required to provide training on access issues and disability awareness in order to meet performance standard 3 – Training. As evidence to support the assessment, (Acting) Returning Officers are required to document a schedule of training activities, listing the topics to be covered and when and how that training will be delivered. Additionally, the (Acting) Returning Officer is required to evaluate all individual training activities that are carried out. Further information on performance standards for Returning Officers can be found on the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/performance-standards and in Part H, 'Performance standards for Returning Officers in Great Britain.'

Equipment

2.5 The (Acting) Returning Officer is required to provide each polling station with sufficient equipment for the poll, including: ballot boxes; ballot papers; a copy of the register of electors; the corresponding number list; the lists of postal voters, proxy voters and postal proxies; the relevant notices, forms and packets; and at least one large print version of the ballot paper and the tactile voting device.²



It is important to note that the corresponding number list for use in the polling station must **not** include the unique identifying marks of the ballot papers.³

2.6 Each Presiding Officer should be given a copy of the list of equipment that they should have been provided with so that they can check that they have everything on polling day.

2.7 A full checklist of equipment is included in the Appendix, 'Resources'.

Persons entitled to attend proceedings on polling day

2.8 The law restricts who may be present inside a polling station. In addition to voters and members of the (Acting) Returning Officer's staff, only the following people may attend:

- persons under the age of 18 years who are accompanying voters
- candidates at the election, their election agents and their sub-agents
- polling agents (only one polling agent per candidate at any given time)
- police officers on duty
- Electoral Commission representatives
- observers accredited by the Commission
- companions of disabled voters

² Rule 29, PER.

³ Rule 29(3), PER.

Persons under the age of 18 years who are accompanying voters

2.9 Persons under the age of 18 years may accompany voters into the polling station. The Presiding Officer may limit the number of under-18s in the polling station at any one time, but this power should only be used where their attendance hinders the proceedings in some way.

Electoral Commission representatives

2.10 Representatives of the Commission are entitled to observe various electoral procedures in addition to the working practices of Electoral Registration Officers, Returning Officers, referendum Counting Officers and staff appointed by them.⁴ This includes attending polling stations during, before and after polling hours. They may ask questions of the (Acting) Returning Officer and their staff, of candidates and agents, and of electors. Commission representatives are instructed not to interfere with the proceedings in any way.

Accredited observers

2.11 Individuals and organisations may apply to the Commission to be accredited to observe the proceedings at the issue and receipt of postal ballot papers, the poll and the counting of the votes.

2.12 Observers accredited by the Commission do not need to give advance notification of where they intend to observe. Every observer must, however, carry photographic identification issued by the Commission and should not be allowed to observe proceedings without it. Sample observer badges can be found in Section 19 of *Essentials of effective election management: planning for a UK Parliamentary general election*, in the *Handbook for polling station staff* and on the Commission's website.

2.13 The (Acting) Returning Officer and their staff can check the status of those seeking to gain access to procedures as observers at any time by downloading the registers of accredited observers from the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/electoral-observers. Since accreditation does not become effective until three days after an observer has been added to the online register, the registers effectively 'close' three days before polling day.



Electoral observation is a legitimate and valuable part of the electoral process, and care should be taken not to hinder or obstruct the conduct of the observation. Although (Acting) Returning Officers are entitled to limit the number of accredited observers who may be present at any proceedings,⁵ the Commission advises that caution should be used in the exercise of this power. It is important to note that no officer is entitled to bar all observers from the entire process, only to limit the number of observers

⁴ Sections 6A and 6B, PPERA.

⁵ Section 6E, PPERA.

present at any one time. Careful consideration therefore needs to be given to the locations used as polling stations or for postal vote opening sessions, ensuring that sufficient space is made available for observers.

In all instances, officers should only seek to limit the number of observers if their presence is hindering the conduct of the proceedings or jeopardising the secrecy of the ballot.

Accredited observers and Commission representatives are obliged to follow a Code of practice, which is available on the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/electoral_observers.

Presiding Officers should be familiar with the salient points of the Code and should be instructed to notify the (Acting) Returning Officer of any potential breaches.

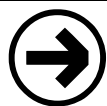
The (Acting) Returning Officer should report any allegations as soon as possible to the Commission's Head Office on 020 7271 0698.

The Commission has also issued guidance to (Acting) Returning Officers and Presiding Officers on the exercise of their powers in relation to observers, as it is required to do by statute. This guidance has been incorporated into the Code of practice for observers referred to above. (Acting) Returning Officers and Presiding Officers are required to refer to this guidance before exercising any of their powers in relation to observers, such as excluding them from polling stations (see webpage above).

The media

2.14 While media representatives have no automatic right to enter a polling station (other than as an elector seeking to cast their vote), they may apply to be an accredited observer. Media representatives accredited by the Commission and attending in such capacity must be treated as any other accredited observers. Like any other observers, they are bound by the Commission's Code of practice for observation, which includes a requirement to maintain the secrecy of the ballot, and by any decision of the (Acting) Returning Officer on the use of cameras and other recording equipment.

2.15 (Acting) Returning Officers should consider providing Presiding Officers with contact details of election staff or other relevant council communications staff in case they are approached by members of the media.



Section 13 of *Essentials of effective election management: planning for a UK Parliamentary general election* offers further guidance for (Acting) Returning Officers on dealing with the media.

Provision of informal turnout information by Presiding Officers

2.16 The Commission is aware of varying practices among (Acting) Returning Officers in respect of whether their Presiding Officers are permitted to release turnout information to candidates and agents throughout polling day.

2.17 Electoral legislation neither requires nor prohibits the disclosure of turnout information by Presiding Officers. The secrecy provisions in Section 66 of the RPA 1983 only impose the following restrictions on the communication of information before the close of poll:

- the name of anyone who has or has not applied for a ballot paper or voted at a polling station
- the elector number of any elector who, or whose proxy, has or has not applied for a ballot paper or voted at a polling station
- the official mark or other unique identifying mark

2.18 As long as (Acting) Returning Officers are satisfied that releasing turnout figures will not in any way hinder the conduct of the poll or risk breaching the provisions of Section 66 of the RPA 1983, they may instruct Presiding Officers to release informal turnout information to candidates and agents.

2.19 Any decision as to whether to supply turnout figures will need to be balanced against the administrative burden that this may impose on Presiding Officers.

2.20 Candidates and their agents should be made aware in advance of the election of what the (Acting) Returning Officer decides in respect of the release of turnout information. The circumstances in which figures may be requested should be clearly defined, e.g. only at certain times of the day and/or when there are no electors inside the polling station. Information to this effect could be included in any candidate briefing pack or supplied alongside guidance for candidates and agents and the Code of conduct on the handling of postal votes, and reinforced at any pre-election briefing session for candidates, their agents and polling station staff.

Personation

2.21 On rare occasions, a member of the polling station team, another elector, a candidate, an election agent or a polling agent may suspect that a person requesting a ballot paper is not who they claim to be. Presiding Officers can ask the prescribed questions before issuing any ballot papers, but if the questions are answered satisfactorily, then a ballot paper must be issued. There are no provisions for any further questioning of the elector by the Presiding Officer. To aid with any future investigation, Presiding Officers could be advised to record a witness statement, noting the key facts and any observations. The Commission has developed a template form, available for download from its website, which could be used for recording such a

statement, at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/uk-parliamentary-elections.



Further advice to Presiding Officers on how to deal with allegations of personation can be found in the *Handbook for polling station staff*.

Anonymous electors

2.22 There may be some electors who have anonymous entries on the electoral register. Anonymous electors will appear on the register without their name and address: their entry on the register will consist of their elector number and the letter 'N', and will be found at the end of the register under the 'Other electors' section. The voting procedure for anonymous electors differs from that for ordinary electors: anonymous electors **must** have their poll card in order to vote.



Full details of the appropriate voting procedure for electors with an anonymous entry are set out in the *Handbook for polling station staff* and should be highlighted at the pre-election briefing session for polling station staff.

3 The register of electors



See Part B, 'Action before the poll', Section 2, 'Register of electors' for details of producing the register of electors for Presiding Officers.

Clerical errors



The deadline for correcting clerical errors on the register is 9pm on polling day.⁶ The determination of clerical errors is a decision of the Electoral Registration Officer.

3.1 There are two types of clerical error that may come to the Electoral Registration Officer's attention on polling day:

- those where an elector has been entered on the register incorrectly, e.g. mis-spelling of a name, or incorrect inputting of numbers in a date of birth indicating that the elector is under 18 years of age
- those where a registration form has been received by the Electoral Registration Officer but no entry has been made on the register

3.2 The Electoral Registration Officer must make a determination on any application suggesting that the register 'contains' a clerical error. The corrective ability of the clerical error rules are intended to encompass any clerical error, including the omission of names clearly shown on a registration application form received by the Electoral Registration Officer in time for the election in question and where an error has been made during the processing of the application form. The register in such a case contains a clerical error in the omission from it of the name on the application form.

3.3 If, however, the elector has made an error in completing the application form and the Electoral Registration Officer has processed the form correctly, this does not amount to a clerical error and so is not covered by the clerical errors provision.

3.4 Representations that a clerical error has occurred in the register may be made to the Electoral Registration Officer either orally or in writing up until 9pm on polling day. The (Acting) Returning Officer cannot alter the register, so where a representation is made to a Presiding Officer at a polling station, they must communicate that representation to the Electoral Registration Officer as soon as is practicable.⁷ This clearly requires that adequate communication systems are available to make and receive such representations.

3.5 In all cases, the Electoral Registration Officer must make a determination on the representation by 9pm on polling day for any error to be corrected and the necessary change made to the electoral register.

⁶ Section 13B, RPA 1983.

⁷ Regulation 32A, RPR 2001.

3.6 Where a clerical amendment is made to the register, or a court decision is received, the Electoral Registration Officer must issue a notice specifying the appropriate alteration. This must be done by making it available for inspection under supervision at their office and at other places, if any, in the registration area that have reasonable facilities for the purpose. Copies must be sent to the person affected and the usual recipients of the register (political parties, the Electoral Commission, etc.).⁸

3.7 The Electoral Registration Officer must take reasonable steps to ensure that the notice is communicated to the appropriate Presiding Officer, either in writing or orally, or both, in order to ensure that the person who is the subject of the notice is permitted to vote. This clearly requires that the Electoral Registration Officer liaises with the (Acting) Returning Officer to ensure that adequate communication systems are in place.

3.8 If the notice is communicated orally, which includes by telephone, the Presiding Officer must make a written record of the elector's name and elector number.⁹

3.9 It is unlikely to be necessary to correct clerical errors on polling day where the elector appears on the register in some form and is able to legitimately answer the statutory questions satisfactorily. However, Presiding Officers should be instructed to act consistently in any such cases and, where there is any doubt, they should contact the Electoral Registration Officer.

3.10 Once the information on the notice has been received and the relevant elector arrives and applies for a ballot, the Presiding Officer must issue the ballot paper in the usual manner. The notice of clerical errors and registration appeals, as amended by the Presiding Officer on polling day, must be marked to show that the elector has voted.

3.11 Both the marked copy of the register of electors and any marked copy of the notice issued to correct clerical errors and registration appeals, as amended by the Presiding Officer on polling day, must be included in the same sealed packet at the close of poll.¹⁰

⁸ Regulation 36(2), RPR 2001.

⁹ Rule 41A, PER.

¹⁰ Rule 43(1)(d), PER.

4 Tellers and polling agents

Tellers

4.1 It is a well-established practice for candidates or their agents to appoint 'tellers', positioned outside polling stations to record the names of electors who have voted, usually by asking for their poll card or elector number. This is for the purpose of assisting party workers to identify potential supporters who have yet to vote.



The Electoral Commission has consulted on guidance on the activities of tellers. This guidance can be found in the Commission's *Handbook for polling station staff* and the *Guidance for candidates and agents*. These documents can be downloaded from the Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-electoral-administrators/uk-parliamentary-elections.

(Acting) Returning Officers should consider supplying polling stations with copies of the guidance on the activities of tellers that could be handed out to tellers by polling station staff on polling day.

4.2 It is important to remember that the (Acting) Returning Officer is in charge of the conduct of the election, and so if they feel that the poll is being adversely affected by the activities of tellers, they should request that tellers either comply with agreed behaviour or leave the polling place.

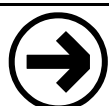
4.3 If any reports of incidents occurring at polling stations are received, members of staff charged with conducting polling station inspections should be directed to attend as soon as possible with a view to resolving any issues. It is also advisable to have the telephone number of the local police available in case of any incidents that cannot be resolved amicably.

Polling agents

4.4 Candidates can have polling agents work on their behalf on polling day in polling stations, although there is no obligation to appoint any such agents. Any person, apart from officials employed by the (Acting) Returning Officer, can be appointed to act as a polling agent. There is no limit to the number of polling agents that may be appointed.

4.5 Polling agents can be appointed by the election agent of a candidate standing nominated, or by any person authorised in writing by them.

4.6 The (Acting) Returning Officer must be notified in writing of the names and addresses of any polling agents no later than two working days before polling day.



More information on the appointment process for polling agents and counting agents can be found in Part B, 'Action before the poll', Section 5, 'Appointment of election, polling and counting agents'.

4.7 Polling agents are required to maintain the secrecy of voting and are subject to the legal requirements relating to secrecy contained in Section 66 of the RPA 1983.

What does a polling agent do?

4.8 Polling agents serve a number of purposes for candidates. They may:

- observe the Presiding Officer showing the empty ballot box(es) prior to sealing
- require the Presiding Officer to put the statutory questions to any elector suspected of personation or attempting to vote twice before they are issued with a ballot paper
- be present when the Presiding Officer marks ballot papers at the request of electors
- mark off on their copy of the register of electors those voters who have applied for a ballot paper
- be present at the close of poll when the various packets of documents are sealed and they may attach their seal to them, including the ballot box(es)

4.9 Polling agents must maintain the secrecy of the ballot. They must not give information to anyone as to who has or has not voted, or a person's elector number, or the official mark. Polling agents may mark off on their copy of the register of electors those voters who have applied for ballot papers, but if they leave the polling station during the hours of polling, their marked copy of the register should be left in the polling station in order not to breach the secrecy requirements.

4.10 Not more than one polling agent on behalf of the same candidate may be admitted into a particular polling station at any time. Any agent may be appointed to attend more than one polling station.

4.11 Although a polling agent is entitled to witness various aspects of the polling procedure, the procedure is not invalidated if they have not witnessed it.

4.12 An election agent or sub-agent can also do anything that a polling agent is authorised to do.

5 Procedure at the close of poll

5.1 Presiding Officers should be briefed to close their polling stations punctually at 10pm. They should be given clear instructions on what they are expected to do after the close of poll and in particular how to correctly fill in the ballot paper account. Poll Clerks should be instructed to deal with notices, polling screens and such like in order to allow Presiding Officers to concentrate on the important paperwork.

5.2 All polling station staff should be made aware that at the close of poll any polling agents, candidates or their agents who are present at the polling station can ask to affix their own seal(s) to the ballot box and packets of documents, and should be allowed to do so.

5.3 Clear instructions should be provided to Presiding Officers about the arrangements for the collection of the ballot boxes and ballot paper accounts, and their onward delivery to the count venue, if Presiding Officers are not themselves transporting the boxes to the count venue. Clear instructions about the arrangements for delivery should also be provided for those who are required to transport the boxes to the count venue. In this case, Presiding Officers should be advised as to the location of the count venue, any parking arrangements, the entrance at which they should deliver their ballot boxes, and procedures for handing in the boxes, ballot paper accounts, any postal votes handed in at the polling station and any other election stationery, including the marked registers.

5.4 A contact number should be provided to Presiding Officers in case they experience any difficulties or delays in getting to the count venue. It is important that this number is staffed until all boxes have been accounted for.

5.5 Presiding Officers should have been instructed on how to complete the ballot paper account correctly and about sealing the various packets of documents, with this forming an important part of their training. Instructions on how to complete the ballot paper account and a checklist of all packets are provided in the *Handbook for polling station staff*. It is nevertheless important to make sure that these are then double-checked on arrival at the count venue.



Combination

If the poll at the UK Parliamentary general election is combined with the poll at another election, consideration should be given to colour coding the ballot paper accounts to match the ballot papers for the different elections. This will minimise the risk of Presiding Officers recording the number of ballot papers issued for the UK Parliamentary general election on the form for the other election, and vice versa.

5.6 To aid efficiency, the Presiding Officer should hand in the ballot paper account and the packet containing any postal votes returned to the polling station separately from any other documentation to be handed in at the count venue. To ensure that the ballot paper account does not get lost during transit it could be attached securely to the ballot box.

5.7 The receipt of the following documents should also be recorded on arrival at the count venue:

- the unused and spoilt ballot papers
- the used tendered ballot papers
- the marked copy of the register (including any marked copies of notices of alteration) and the list of proxies
- the completed corresponding number list
- the spoilt ballot papers and the certificates of employment
- the tendered votes list, the list of voters with disabilities assisted by companions, the list of votes marked by the Presiding Officer and accompanying statement, and the declarations made by the companions of voters with disabilities

5.8 Presiding Officers should be supplied with different sacks, clearly labelled and perhaps colour coded, including one for the packets of documents to be returned to the appropriate officer for storage and another for other items of stationery. Presiding Officers should be advised to dispose of any rubbish at the polling station and leave the accommodation ready for its original use.

5.9 It is advisable to appoint staff who are solely responsible for receiving and checking items into the count venue until all materials have been received from the polling stations.

Appendix – Resources

Equipment checklist

The full list of items that should be provided at each polling station is as follows:

- ballot box(es)
- relevant part of the register and any notices issued under Section 13B(3B) or (3D) of the RPA 1983
- corresponding number list
- absent voters lists – postal voters, proxy voters and postal proxies
- ballot papers
- ballot paper account
- tendered ballot papers
- stamping instrument (if official mark is not pre-printed)
- voting device for use by blind or partially sighted voters
- copy of the statutory questions
- copy of the requirements as to secrecy (Section 66 of the RPA 1983)
- forms of declaration by companions of voters with disabilities
- form of list of tendered votes
- form of list of votes marked by the Presiding Officer
- form of statement of number of votes marked by the Presiding Officer
- form of list of voters with disabilities assisted by companions
- direction for guidance of voters
- large-print version of the ballot paper
- enlarged hand-held sample copy of the ballot paper
- voting compartment notices
- polling station notices
- polling screens
- plastic seals or locks for sealing the ballot box¹¹
- pencils for use by voters, and string to attach them to the polling booths
- notepaper for use by polling station staff
- stationery items as required, e.g. paper clips, drawing pins, Blu-Tack, adhesive tape
- envelopes, preferably with seals, in which to place postal ballot papers returned to the polling station
- envelopes for making up packets
- plastic sacks for returning stationery and equipment to the verification venue
- form to record errors on the register of electors (which may form part of a polling station log or be appended to the polling station register)
- form of list to record electors marked as postal voters but who claim not to have applied for one

¹¹ The Commission does not recommend the use of sealing wax for health and safety reasons. However, if this method is used, it is important that staff are instructed to exercise extreme caution.

Accessibility checklist for polling day – setting up a polling station

The initial setting-up of a polling station can determine whether it is accessible or not. It is therefore important that polling staff who are responsible for setting up polling stations are made aware of the following considerations.

Signage at polling stations

- Signs should be positioned so that electors can be directed to the entrance for disabled voters, if this is different from the main entrance to the polling station.
- All signs should be placed at an appropriate height, so that someone in a wheelchair can read them without difficulty.
- A simple notice could be displayed outside the polling station to advise voters to ask the Presiding Officer to provide help if required.
- A large polling station sign should be visible from the main road.

Car parking for disabled people

- Any car parking spaces for disabled people should be clearly marked.
- Polling station staff should not park their own cars in these spaces and should, if possible, check the parking spaces throughout polling day to ensure that they are kept available for use by disabled people.

Level access to polling stations

- If temporary ramps are to be used at a polling station, the Presiding Officer should be informed beforehand and ideally be shown how to install them if they will not be in place before polling day.
- Ramps should be secure and stable with a low gradient. If they are not fitted properly, they can be dangerous and could cause injury to electors.
- Ramps should be kept clear of any obstructions.
- Polling station staff should check any temporary ramps at regular intervals to make sure that they have not become dislodged and are not presenting a hazard to electors.

Entrances to polling stations

- If possible the main entrance should be the one that is accessible to disabled people.
- If there is separate access for disabled people, this should be clearly signed and kept open.
- Heavy doors that are difficult to open can be a major access barrier to some electors. Propping doors open can help, although this is not ideal if polling station staff are left sitting in a cold draught and electors have to vote in cold conditions.
- Any loose mats should be removed if they are likely to present a trip hazard.

Inside the polling station

- Inadequate space inside the polling station causes problems for people with mobility impairments who may need more space to manoeuvre. It also means that people cannot be assured that their vote is secret and unobserved by other voters. Therefore, polling station staff should set up the polling station considering the best place to site themselves, the ballot box and the polling booths, ensuring that people have enough space to enter, exit and manoeuvre around the polling station.

Lighting of polling stations

- Adequate lighting is important for people with visual impairments. Many people's vision is dependent on the quality of lighting, especially for reading and writing. Good lighting, both in the polling booth and where the large-print version of the ballot paper is displayed, is vital.
- Lighting outside the polling station, particularly in the area leading up to the entrance, should be adequate.
- Lighting inside the entrance, corridors and room where the polling booths are situated is also important so that voters can get to and from the polling booth easily.
- Polling station staff need to be aware of the lighting conditions in the polling station and should switch on whatever lights are necessary.
- Polling booths should not be placed in direct sunlight as the glare might cause difficulties for someone who is visually impaired.

Low-level polling booths and ballot boxes

- Low-level polling booths are an easy way to improve the accessibility of polling stations and should be installed in every polling station.
- The ballot box should be placed on a chair rather than a table as this allows wheelchair users and other people who are not able to reach ballot boxes on tables the opportunity to cast their vote independently and confidentially.
- A white strip placed around the slot of the ballot box helps visually impaired people to locate the opening more easily.

Guidance to voters

- The notice which must be displayed in every compartment of every polling station explaining how to fill in the ballot paper can be produced in a graphical format or in any other way that makes the information more accessible to persons who might not otherwise have reasonable access to the information.

Large-print notice of ballot paper and hand-held sample copy

- Large-print notices are important to people with visual impairments and can allow someone to vote independently.
- At least one large-print version of the ballot paper must be displayed inside the polling station for the assistance of voters who are blind or partially sighted. However, it is helpful to provide more than one large-print version of the ballot paper.
- The legislation also requires that an enlarged hand-held copy of the ballot paper, marked as 'sample', is available to anyone who requires it. This can be given to voters to take into the polling booth with them. If these are laminated, it helps to prevent them getting torn or dirty.

Device to enable voters who are blind or partially sighted to vote without assistance

- It is a legal requirement to provide a tactile voting device at every polling station. The tactile template is a device that allows someone who is blind or partially sighted to mark the ballot paper themselves once the details on the ballot paper have been read out, either by their companion or by the Presiding Officer.
- Polling station staff should be made aware that the provision of a tactile template is a legal requirement and should be trained in the use of the device in order to be able to assist those who wish to vote using the device.
- In many cases, voters who may find the template useful may not be aware that it is available for them to use. It may, therefore, be helpful for polling station staff to suggest to electors that they may wish to use the device where it appears appropriate. The right approach is important to avoid causing offence.

Seating

- Chairs can be provided in polling stations for anyone who needs a rest. However, chairs should not be placed so that they get in the way of other voters, nor should they overlook people casting their votes.

General

- All electors, including disabled people and older people, should be treated as individuals. The manner in which such people are approached is important: if you think someone needs assistance, ask them first, rather than make assumptions.
- Presiding Officers could set up a table in the polling station with all the materials for disabled voters, so that they or their companions can see everything that is available to assist them, including the enlarged sample copies of the ballot papers and the devices to assist voters who are blind or partially sighted.

- Seeking feedback from disabled voters as to the access and disabled facilities at their polling station may help to highlight any previously unnoticed issues and drive future improvements.

Notification of secrecy requirements

Section 66 of the Representation of the People Act 1983 (as amended)

(1) The following persons –

- (a) every returning officer and every presiding officer or clerk attending at a polling station,
- (b) every candidate or election agent or polling agent so attending
- (c) every person so attending by virtue of any of sections 6A to 6D of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000

shall maintain and aid in maintaining the secrecy of voting and shall not, except for some purpose authorised by law, communicate to any person before the poll is closed any information as to –

- (i) the name of any elector or proxy for an elector who has or has not applied for a ballot paper or voted at a polling station;
- (ii) the number on the register of electors of any elector who, or whose proxy, has or has not applied for a ballot paper or voted at a polling station; or
- (iii) the official mark.

[...]

(3) No person shall –

- (a) interfere with or attempt to interfere with a voter when recording his vote;
- (b) otherwise obtain or attempt to obtain in a polling station information as to the candidate for whom a voter in that station is about to vote or has voted;
- (c) communicate at any time to any person any information obtained in a polling station as to the candidate for who a voter in that station is about to vote or has voted, or as to the number or other unique identifying mark on the back of the ballot paper given to a voter at that station;
- (d) directly or indirectly induce a voter to display his ballot paper after he has marked it so as to make known to any person the name of the candidate for whom he has or has not voted.

[...]

(5) No person having undertaken to assist a blind voter to vote shall communicate at any time to any person any information as to the candidate for whom that voter intends to vote or has voted, or as to the number or other unique identifying mark on the back of the ballot paper given for the use of that voter.

(6) If a person acts in contravention of this section he shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months.