Counting of votes at the UK Parliamentary election: statement by (Acting) Returning Officer

Please complete and return this statement to Suzanne Miller SMiller@electoralcommission.org.uk if you did not start the UK Parliamentary election count within four hours of the close of poll. Please submit the statement by **5 June 2015** at the latest.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency name:</th>
<th>Hemel Hempstead</th>
<th>Date of election:</th>
<th>7 May 2015</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Acting) Returning Officer’s name:</td>
<td>Sally Marshall</td>
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**Required information**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Time counting of votes began: (hh/mm)</th>
<th>03.55 am</th>
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**Statistics**

Combined Poll for Hemel Hempstead Parliamentary Constituency, full Borough Council Elections and Parish Council elections. The Electoral area also includes eleven polling stations for the South West Hertfordshire Parliamentary constituency.

- Contested seats:
  - Hemel Hempstead Parliamentary Constituency - Parliamentary electors - 76,000 serviced by 67 polling stations
  - Dacorum Borough Council electors - 111,000 serviced by 88 polling stations
  - All 51 Borough Council seats contested
  - 10 Parish Councils contested

**Venue**

The Civic Centre is of insufficient size to be utilised as a count facility. Therefore, a local sports hall was hired for the count. The venue provided: ample space for ballot box reception; 120 count management and counting staff in half the hall area; and ample space for all visitors and observers.

A separate room adjacent to the main sports hall was also hired for processing Postal votes received on the day of the election.

Secure ICT infrastructure was established to enable the remote use of
Election computer software.

Staff
Eighty one counting assistants and twenty eight table leaders and count supervisors were employed to carry out the Verification and Parliamentary Count. Given the scale of the combined poll and the fact that a number of the Council’s pool of experienced counting staff were involved in Polling Station duties throughout the polling day I set a target of ensuring that at least 50% experienced counters were engaged for the evening’s count. This provided the opportunity to engage “new blood” for continuity purposes whilst also mitigating the risk of error arising from the use of overtired staff. Two (Acting) Deputy Returning Officer’s were appointed to support the ARO, both of whom are highly experienced in all Election Count procedures.

Outline Methodology
Given the overriding need for accurate and reliable results the following methodology was adopted for the verification process:

- Ballot Boxes to be received shortly after close of poll at ballot box reception;
- paperwork checked,
- Ballot boxes moved to one of four pre-allocated count teams
- Ballot boxes stacked by polling station.
- Separate ballot boxes were issued for each election therefore, each count supervisor would then select the Parliamentary Ballot box first and proceed with verification, followed by the Local Ballot Boxes for the same station.
- On the first verification count zero tolerance was required.

Once verification for ALL contested elections had been completed, I would then move on to the Parliamentary Count.

Anticipated start of verification process
Given the close proximity of some of the polling stations to the count venue I anticipated Ballot Boxes would start arriving at the count venue by 10.15 pm; with the last to arrive by 11.00pm, based on the experience of earlier polls. Queues at polling stations were not anticipated, though Presiding Officers were carefully briefed on how to deal with such a situation.

Postal Votes
I anticipated a postal vote level of aprox 11,000 with a return level of 85%. I further anticipated around 900 postal envelopes being returned
by Presiding Officers with their Ballot Boxes. Polling Station Inspectors were to collect Postal Votes twice during the day.

**Communication**

An anticipated 150 Candidates, Agents, Observers Guests and Partners were expected to attend the Verification process. Candidates and Election Agents were to be easily identified by colour coded wrist bands, and to be briefed on proposed proceedings by myself. In pre-election agent briefings I stressed that any issues relating to the poll or the verification and count should be raised, gathered, considered and discussed openly and that any concerns should be communicated directly to myself.

**Verification**

The 67 Presiding Officers were provided with one Parliamentary ballot box and separate boxes for the Local elections.

Given that separate boxes were issued for each election I anticipated that ballot papers would get into the wrong box. This was the case, therefore, the Parliamentary box was verified first followed immediately by the local box from that station.

The bundles of 25 were double checked before presenting the ballot box figure to Table supervisors, if there was any discrepancy with the Ballot Paper Account, a recount would take place.

Given the overriding need for an accurate and reliable result and the fact that I anticipated some minority parties’ deposits could be at risk I stressed that accuracy was paramount and under no circumstances should this be be sacrificed in favour of speed. (Indeed, three candidates did lose their deposits. One of the deposits was only lost by 79 votes).

In many instances this led to double checking of Ballot Paper Accounts, several of which were found to be inaccurate, even though specific training had been carried out, using the Electoral Commission’s own suggested exercise. This inevitably led to some delay and was a contributory factor to the delayed start of the count.

**Postal Votes**

I anticipated a postal vote level of aproxim 11,000 with a return level of 85%. This figure proved to be an accurate forecast, so the team were able to keep pace with the arrival of envelopes in the lead up to polling day, despite some early difficulties with software releases.

All postal votes received by the postal vote team prior to the close of poll had been fully checked and were ready to be included in the Verification. Polling Station Inspectors did two visits to stations to
collect postal votes, in addition, extra visits were undertaken to some of
the busiest stations throughout the evening and postal votes were
collected at these visits.

The number of envelopes delivered to the count by Presiding Officers
exceeded expectations at just over 1,000.

Whilst secure ICT infrastructure was provided at the count venue to
enable the remote use of Electoral Software, Broadband speeds at the
count venue were slower than the Civic Centre and slowed the
scanning part of the postal vote checking relative to the time normally
required at the Civic Centre.

**Verification Start**

As already stated, I expected the Ballot Boxes to start arriving at the
count venue at about 10.15 pm; with the last to arrive by 11.00pm.
However, the first boxes to arrive were slightly later than anticipated at
10.20pm and the last boxes did not arrive until after 11.30pm.

The verification process started within minutes of the first box arriving at
10.20pm. There were no reports of queues at polling stations at
10.00pm.

**Communication**

Candidates and Election Agents were identified, briefed and consulted
on progress of proceedings at regular intervals throughout the evening.
Their opinions were gathered, considered and discussed.

All agreed that the verification should proceed to conclusion in all
elections before starting the Parliamentary count despite the delays in
reconciling the verification figures to enable accurate and reliable
results to be produced and also enable any Parliamentary ballot papers
relating to the South West Hertfordshire Parliamentary constituency to
be couried to the other count venue.

This approach has been supported by correspondence that I have
received from agents and the elected MP since the election thanking
me and the count staff for our excellent organisation and our efforts to
ensure that everything ran smoothly.

**Date of this statement:** 4th June 2015