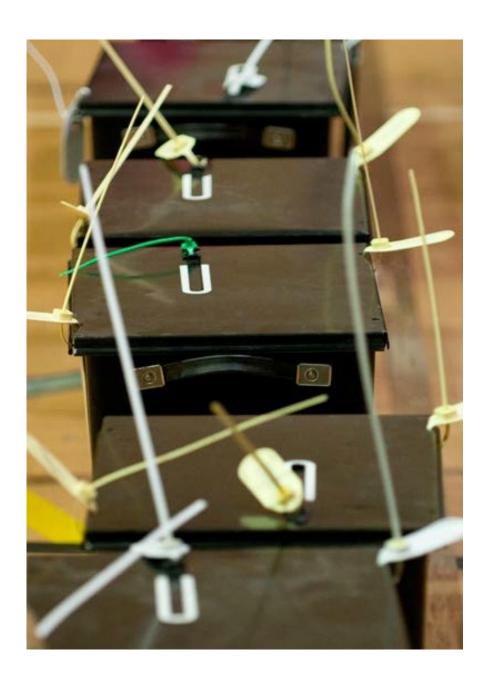# Scottish Council Elections

Counting the votes

Introduction

This 'easy guide' is for the Scottish council elections. The Scottish council elections are counted electronically using specially designed software and this guide will provide you with an overview of how the count processes will work.

Timing of the count

The RO must take reasonable steps to begin counting the votes as soon as practicable after the close of poll. The Electoral Management Board (EMB) will provide directions for all ROs as to when to begin counting the votes.

Who's who at the count

Many people are involved in running an election count, but you are most likely to come across the following:

- **The Returning Officer (RO) -** is the person in charge of the election for the council.
- **Depute ROs (DROs)** – they assist the RO throughout the count.
- **Supervisors** – they supervise the count teams and report to the RO and his/her deputes.
- **Count staff** – there are a number of different roles at the count, these include:
    - **registration staff** – who are responsible for ensuring that all ballot papers are accounted for and prepared to be scanned
    - **scanning staff** – who ensure that all the ballot papers are scanned into the e-counting system
    - **adjudicators** – who are responsible for the adjudication of doubtful ballot papers

What elections are taking place?

There are elections to all 32 councils in Scotland. Each council is comprised of wards and voters will be asked to vote for candidates within those wards using an electoral system called Single Transferable Vote (STV). This means that voters will mark their ballot paper by numbering the candidates in order of their choice. Voters will be asked to put a number 1 in the voting box next to their first choice candidate, a number 2 next to their second choice, a 3 next to their third choice and so on. Voters can make as many or as few choices as they wish.

What happens at a count?

There are different stages to the count and these can be summarised as follows:

- all ballot papers will be scanned and the number verified against records of ballot papers issued at the polling station or against records of returned postal ballot papers
- the system will count all of the voting preferences on each paper where the voter's intention is clear
- where a voter's intention is not clear, a scanned image of that ballot paper is sent for adjudication
- the system will calculate the results and allocate seats

All ballot papers will pass through this process in batches, but different batches of ballot papers will be at different stages of the count at different times. Screens will be available for candidates, agents and observers showing the progress of the count.

The different stages of the count will be explained in more detail in the following sections.

Ballot box receipt

At the close of poll staff will deliver the sealed ballot boxes containing postal votes and the sealed ballot boxes from the polling stations to a secure location. All sealed ballot boxes will be stored securely overnight and, where necessary, transported to the count venue the following morning in time to commence the count.

Ballot box opening

At the commencement of the count each sealed ballot box will be opened and the ballot papers removed, unfolded, orientated and placed in a ballot paper tray. Ballot papers from the same ballot box will all be placed in the same tray and not mixed with ballot papers from any other other ballot boxes. Each tray will have been pre-allocated a unique barcode.

Registration of ballot papers

Registration staff will register each of the ballot paper trays by scanning the pre-allocated barcode. This registers that particular tray onto the e-counting system. Registration staff will also record into the e-counting system the number of ballot papers issued as recorded on the ballot paper account. This is a form completed at each polling station which accounts for the ballot papers allocated to that polling station, whether they are in the box, unused or spoiled. Postal votes are accounted for in a similar way.

Once a ballot paper tray has been registered it will be placed into a holding area to await the scanning of its ballot papers.

Scanning of ballot papers

The scanning staff will scan all of the ballot papers in each ballot paper tray in turn. This ensures that the votes are recorded into the e-counting system, however the votes are not counted at this stage.

Verifying and counting the votes

Once all of the ballot papers in a ballot paper tray have been scanned, they are taken to a holding area to await verification. Verification is where the number of scanned ballot papers in the ballot paper tray will be compared against the actual numbers of ballot papers recorded on the ballot paper account which were entered into the e-counting system at the registration stage.

Where the number of ballot papers matches the number expected, the ballot papers are ready to be counted and verification staff will tell the system that the counting stage can commence. Where the numbers do not match, the ballot papers in the ballot paper tray will be scanned again. If there is still a difference after scanning the ballot paper again, staff will be asked to investigate. The Returning Officer will then record a reason for the difference and release the ballot papers onto the next stage of the count.

Once all of the ballot papers have been verified, the e-counting system will read the voters' preferences on the ballot papers and calculate the results based on the preferences recorded on the ballot papers.

Where the voter's preferences are clear the ballot paper will be counted. In instances where the e-counting system cannot read voter's preferences the ballot paper will be sent for adjudication.

What if the e-counting system is unable to read the vote on a ballot paper?

Where the system is unable to read the vote on a ballot paper it will be sent for adjudication. Specially trained count staff, will try to determine the voter's intention. If they are unable to do this, the ballot paper will be deferred, so that the Returning Officer, or one of their Deputes, can inspect and adjudicate it. Only the Returning Officer or one of their Deputes can reject a ballot paper.

How are the seats allocated using Single Transferable Vote?

There will be either three or four seats to be filled in each ward.
To gain one of the seats a candidate must receive a minimum number of votes known as the quota. The quota is calculated by using the formula below:

$$\left[\frac{\text{Total number of valid ballot papers}}{\text{Number of councillors to be elected} + 1} \right] + 1$$

The number of valid first preferences given to each candidate will be counted. Any candidate who reaches or exceeds the quota is deemed elected.

Any votes a candidate has received above the quota are then redistributed according to the voter's next preference, if there is one. This is transferring surplus.

If there are still seats to be filled after all surpluses have been transferred, the candidate with the fewest votes will be excluded. Their votes will then be transferred to the voters' next choice candidate who has not been deemed elected or excluded.

The process of transferring surpluses and excluding candidates will continue until all of the seats have been filled.

There may come a point where the number of remaining candidates is equal to the number of seats that are still unfilled. Where this is the case, the remaining candidates are deemed elected.

All calculations are carried out by the e-counting system. The software will generate reports providing a detailed analysis of the calculations at each stage of the count.

Announcement of result

When all of the stages of the count have been completed for each ward, the Returning Officer will give candidates and agents a provisional notice of the result. At this point, they have the opportunity to request a recount. If there are no recounts, or once they have been completed, the Returning Officer will publicly declare the successful candidates to be elected.

The Returning Officer will publish a notice with the name of each candidate elected, the number of first and subsequent preferences cast for each candidate at each stage of the count and the number of rejected ballot papers. More detailed information will be published by the Returning Officer in the week following the election.