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published: 14 April 2023 Last updated: 4 May 2023 Guidance for electoral observers in  
England This guidance is for electoral observers who have been accredited by the  
Electoral Commission. It includes information on the elections taking place and what  
to expect at the electoral processes you are entitled to observe. about becoming an  
accredited observer What elections are taking place? On Thursday 4 May 2023 there  
will be local council elections and local authority mayoral elections across England.  
This guidance is for accredited observers in England. Separate guidance is available  
for observers in Northern Ireland. What can I observe? As an accredited observer you  
are entitled to attend: the issue and receipt of postal ballot papers the polling  
stations the verification and counting of the votes We have published a Code of  
Practice for electoral observers. You must comply with the standards of behaviour set  
out in this Code. You do not need to tell electoral officials that you want to  
observe proceedings; by law you have a right to attend as detailed above. However, if  
you do tell them, they may be able to provide you with some relevant local and  
practical information, for example a list of polling stations or adaptations made to  
venues for accessibility purposes. You can still make unannounced visits or change  
your plans if you want to. Who can vote in these elections? A person can vote in  
these elections if they are: included on the electoral register at an address in  
England 18 years of age or over on the day of election a British, Irish or qualifying  
Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the European Union What voting methods will be  
used? Local elections Local council and local mayoral elections in England use the  
first-past-the-post system. The ballot paper will list the candidates standing in  
that area. Voters can vote for as many candidates as there are vacancies in that  
area. Some councils have local elections every four years and elect all councillors  
at the same time. Other councils vote by thirds. This means that a third of  
councillors are elected every year over a three year period with no elections in the  
fourth year. Other councils vote by halves with half of the councillors elected every  
two years. There may also be by-elections taking place for other seats on the council  
that have become vacant. Some areas may also have town or parish council elections  
taking place. Who does what at these elections? Returning Officers Every county,  
district, unitary and metropolitan council in England is required to appoint an  
officer of the council to be the Returning Officer (RO) for the election of  
councillors to their local authority. They are usually a senior officer of the  
council, but independent of it in respect of their electoral functions. The person  
appointed as the RO for principal area elections will be the local RO for any mayoral  
elections in the local authority. Every district council in England must also appoint  
an officer of the council to be the RO for any elections of councillors of parishes  
within the district. This may be the same person as the RO for principal area  
elections, but does not need to be. You can contact the RO for the area in which you  
intend to observe through your local elections office. Find the contact details for  
election offices. The RO will offer briefings and training sessions ahead of the  
elections for candidates and for staff working on the election. You may be able to  
attend these sessions which will help you to understand the processes that you are  
entitled to attend and observe. If you wish to attend these briefings you should

contact the relevant elections office beforehand to arrange your attendance. The Electoral Registration Officer The Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is responsible for maintaining the register of electors and absent voters' lists for their area. The ERO is normally a senior officer of a local authority and may also be the RO. Find the contact details for EROs. The Electoral Commission The Electoral Commission is an independent statutory body set up by UK Parliament. We register political parties and non-party campaigners, monitor and publish donations to political parties and regulate spending at certain elections. We also accredit observers to attend election proceedings. We do not run elections but have responsibility for providing advice and assistance on electoral matters to all those involved in elections. We also promote voter awareness. Our contact details are: The Electoral Commission 3 Bunhill Row London EC1Y 8YZ Tel: 020 7271 0500 Email: [info@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:info@electoralcommission.org.uk) Website: [www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk) Postal voting Electors can apply to vote by post. The RO starts to send postal voting packs to postal voters around two weeks before polling day. Voters can return their packs by post to their local council or hand them in to certain polling stations on polling day. Completed postal voting packs must be returned by 10pm on polling day. You are entitled to attend both the issuing of postal voting packs and postal vote opening sessions. You can also appoint a postal vote agent to attend on your behalf. The RO will be able to tell you when and where these sessions are taking place. What happens at a postal vote issuing session? There are likely to be several sessions for issuing postal votes. These could take place at an external printers. At the issuing session, postal voting packs will be put together. The packs will include: Envelope A – this is the envelope that the elector returns their ballot paper(s) in. It is marked with the letter 'A' and the words 'ballot paper envelope' Envelope B – this is the envelope that the elector will use to return the ballot paper envelope and the postal voting statement. It is marked with the letter 'B' and the address of the RO The postal voting statement – this contains the elector's name, the number of the ballot paper(s) issued to them, instructions on how to vote by post and space for the elector to sign and provide their date of birth The ballot paper(s) Postal voting packs will then be delivered to electors, either by hand or by post. If the election is combined with another poll, the RO may send the ballot paper(s) for each election together or separately. When will postal votes be opened? It is likely that there will be several postal vote opening sessions before polling day, as well as on polling day itself. You can contact the RO for details of these locally. There will also be a final opening session held after the polls have closed. Postal votes handed in to polling stations will be opened at this session. This session may be held at the count venue or in another location. What happens at a postal vote opening session? Postal voters must complete and return a postal voting statement which includes their signature and date of birth, as well as their ballot paper(s). The RO will decide whether or not the date of birth and signature provided by electors on their postal voting statements matches the signature and date of birth previously provided by the elector and held on their records. If they do not match, the postal vote will be rejected. A very small number of voters will have been granted a waiver because they are unable to sign or provide a consistent signature due to a disability or an inability to read or write. These voters do not need to sign their postal voting statement. The postal vote opening process can be summarised as follows: Post vote opening procedure Stage 1 Step 1: Open the postal voters' ballot box. Step 2: Count and record the number of covering envelopes (Envelopes 'B') Step 3: Open the covering envelopes (envelopes 'B') and remove the postal voting statement and ballot

paper envelope (envelope 'A') Step 4: Mark all returned postal vote statements on the postal/postal proxy list to show it is returned If not all parts of the postal vote have been returned: Step 5: Mark the envelope 'provisionally rejected', attach contents and add to the rejected votes packet. Add to the lists as appropriate: the list of ballot papers received without a valid (or any) postal voting statement the list of ballot paper numbers of postal voting statements received without a ballot paper. See Stage 4. Stage 2 Step 1: Verify the personal identifiers on the returned postal voting statements Step 2: Separate the ballot paper envelopes from the postal voting statements and keep both in order Step 3: Determine those postal voting statements that are missing a date of birth and/or signature or where either/both do not match those held on the identifier record. Adjudicate those and reject where either are not included or you are not satisfied that the statement is duly completed. Invalid postal voting statements are rejected. The statements, ballot paper and envelopes are marked 'rejected' and placed in the receptacle for rejected votes Postal voters who have been granted a waiver only need to complete their date of birth Step 4: Check the number on the postal voting statement matches the number on the ballot paper envelope (envelope "A"). After matching, package up the postal voting statements and seal the packet. If the numbers do not match: Step 5: Open the envelope. If the ballot paper matches the statement, it is valid and should go in the postal ballot box. Non-matching ones should be provisionally rejected (see below). Stage 3 Step 1: Open the ballot paper envelopes (envelopes 'A') If the ballot paper is inside the envelope: Step 2: Remove the ballot paper(s), ensuring they are kept face down at all times Step 3: Check the number on the ballot paper envelope (envelope 'A') against the number on the back of the ballot paper Step 4: Keep the ballot papers face down at all times. Don't look or allow others to look at the votes marked on the ballot papers. Step 5: Place ballot papers in the postal ballot box or appropriate receptacle and proceed to Stage 5. If the ballot paper number does not match: Step 2: Attach the ballot paper to the envelope Step 3: Mark it as 'provisionally rejected' and put it in the receptacle for rejected votes Step 4: Add to the both the list of ballot papers received without a valid postal statement and the list of ballot paper numbers of postal voting statements received without a ballot paper If there is no ballot paper inside the envelope: Step 2: Mark 'provisionally rejected' and put in the receptacle for rejected ballot paper envelopes. Step 3: Add to the list of ballot paper numbers of postal voting statements received without a ballot paper. Stage 4 Step 1: To match up separated documents, check the two reject lists against all ballot papers/postal voting statements that have been returned separately from their corresponding postal voting statement/ballot paper and, if possible, match them up The two lists must be taken to the final opening of postal votes to carry out any final matching Step 2: Record any successful match on the relevant lists Step 3: Place the ballot papers that are no longer to be treated as provisionally rejected in the postal ballot box or appropriate receptacle and place the accompanying postal voting statements in the appropriate receptacle. Stage 5 Step 1: Count and record the total number of ballot papers, keeping the ballot papers face down at all times Actual votes are not counted at this stage Step 2: Place the ballot papers in the postal ballot box, which must be sealed at the end of each opening session and stored securely Step 3: Complete postal vote ballot paper account Duty to maintain secrecy The RO will give you a copy of the statutory Requirement of Secrecy. Anyone attending a postal vote issuing or opening session must comply with this. Ballot papers will be kept face down throughout a postal vote opening session. Anyone attending an opening session must not: attempt to

see how individual ballot papers have been marked attempt to look at identifying marks or numbers on ballot papers disclose how any particular ballot paper has been marked pass on any such information gained from the session Anyone found guilty of breaching these requirements can face an unlimited fine, or may be imprisoned for up to six months. Observing at polling stations You are entitled to observe inside polling stations. The RO will be able to provide you with a list of all polling stations in the area where you want to observe. Returning Officers may have reviewed their polling stations since the last elections and there may be some late changes to polling stations if venues become unavailable. Look out for such changes being communicated via local authority websites and/or social media channels. When are polling stations open? Polling stations will be open between 7am and 10pm on Thursday 4 May 2023. You are permitted to arrive shortly before this to observe the sealing of the ballot box(es) prior to the poll opening. What will the inside of the polling station look like? The layout within each polling station may differ, but it may look similar to the images below: Example of a single polling station layout with one entrance/exit: Example of a single polling station layout with separate entrance and exit: Example of a double polling station layout: Who can vote at a polling station? Any person on the polling station's electoral register can vote at the polling station unless: they are a registered postal voter they are a registered proxy voter and their proxy has already voted for them or has applied to vote on their behalf by post they are not 18 years of age or older on polling day they are registered as an overseas elector Electors receive a poll card before the election telling them where they can vote. Most electors do not need to take their poll card to the polling station in order to vote. The only electors who need to bring a poll card with them to vote are those who have registered anonymously because of risks to their safety. Registered postal voters cannot be issued with a ballot paper at the polling station. They can return their completed postal ballot pack to their polling station or any polling station in the relevant electoral area or to the RO at the elections office. Postal ballot packs returned to polling stations must be handed to polling station staff and not placed in the ballot box. Polling station staff will keep any postal votes secure until they are collected. Who is allowed to be in the polling station? The following people are entitled by law to be present in a polling station: the RO and their staff the Presiding Officer and clerks voters persons under voting age who accompany voters companions of disabled voters candidates and their election agents polling agents police officers and community support officers on duty at the polling station Electoral Commission representatives observers accredited by the Electoral Commission What do polling agents do? Candidates and political parties can appoint polling agents to be present at any polling station. The main role of a polling agent is to detect personation (when an individual votes as someone else – whether that person is living or dead, or is a fictitious person). Other duties that the polling agents may undertake include: checking that the ballot box is empty at 7am being present when the Presiding Officer marks a ballot paper on behalf of a voter being present at the close of poll to observe the sealing up of the ballot box and other packages attaching their own seal to the ballot box or any packet in addition to the official seal What happens in a polling station? Polling station staff will: ask voters for their name and address, and make sure they are eligible to vote ask voters for photographic ID mark a straight line against the voter's entry on the register of electors call out the number and name of the elector write the elector number on a list next to the number(s) of the ballot paper(s) to be issued ensure the ballot paper(s) include the official mark (e.g. a barcode or watermark) fold the ballot

paper(s) and then hand them to the voter unfolded so that they can see all of the options on the ballot paper(s) Voters will need to produce one of the following documents in order to prove their identity: a passport issued by the UK, any of the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, a British Overseas Territory, an EEA state, or a Commonwealth country (including an Irish Passport Card) a driving licence issued by the UK, any of the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man, or an EEA state (this includes a provisional driving licence) a biometric immigration document an identity card bearing the Proof of Age Standards Scheme hologram (a PASS card) a Ministry of Defence Form 90 (Defence Identity Card) a Blue Badge a national identity card issued by an EEA state an Older Person's Bus Pass funded by the Government of the United Kingdom a Disabled Person's Bus Pass funded by the Government of the United Kingdom an Oyster 60+ Card funded by the Government of the United Kingdom a Freedom Pass a Scottish National Entitlement Card issued in Scotland a 60 and Over Welsh Concessionary Travel Card issued in Wales a Disabled Person's Welsh Concessionary Travel Card issued in Wales a Senior SmartPass issued in Northern Ireland a Registered Blind SmartPass or Blind Person's SmartPass issued in Northern Ireland a War Disablement SmartPass issued in Northern Ireland a 60+ SmartPass issued in Northern Ireland a Half Fare SmartPass issued in Northern Ireland an Electoral Identity Card issued in Northern Ireland Voter Authority Certificate These documents are listed in legislation and no other forms of identity can be accepted. The identification document does not need to be current, but the photograph must be of a good enough likeness to allow polling station staff to confirm the identity of the holder. The voter will: mark the ballot paper(s) in private in the polling booth fold the ballot paper(s) and show the ballot paper number(s) and unique identifying mark on the back of the ballot paper(s) to the Presiding Officer place the ballot paper(s) in the ballot box(es) and leave the polling station A single ballot box may be used for all of the elections or one box may be used for each separate election. What assistance is available for voters with disabilities? Through our work with civil society organisations and charities we have identified a range of equipment that can help to overcome the known barriers faced by disabled people. The following equipment should, as a minimum, be provided in all polling stations to support disabled voters: chairs/seating – this provides a place to rest for voters who cannot stand for long periods and a seat for voters who would like to take some time to think before entering the polling booth magnifiers – these can provide support for voters who are visually impaired to vote independently by increasing the size of the text on a document tactile voting device – tactile voting devices provide support for voters who are visually impaired to mark their vote on the ballot paper in the correct place, provided it is placed on the ballot paper correctly. They have been found to provide assistance in completing the ballot paper once visually impaired voters know the position on the ballot paper of the candidate for whom they wish to vote. They do not allow blind voters to vote independently unless they also have accessible information about the order of the candidates on the ballot paper polling booth at wheelchair level – helps to ensure that voters who use a wheelchair are able access a lower writing surface to ensure they can cast their vote in secret in a booth that is accessible badges identifying polling station staff – these help voters more easily identify who is a member of staff in the polling station and can therefore be approached for assistance. pencil grip – these can help voters with dexterity impairments to more easily hold and use a pencil independently ramps (for buildings with steps) – these support access to a polling station for voters who use a wheelchair or have difficulty using steps temporary alerters or temporary doorbells

for any doors that are required to remain shut during the day (for example, fire doors) – these provide a way for voters to let polling station staff know that they need assistance to open the door so they can access the polling station. These do not need to be permanently fixed or installed in a building used as a polling station but can be temporarily placed at an accessible level on a table or chair next to any doors that must remain closed

appropriate lighting – some polling station venues have good lighting but others may need additional lighting at the desk; to ensure that voters can clearly see the faces of staff, and in the polling booths; to support voters with visual impairments to be able to read and complete the ballot paper.

parking spaces reserved for disabled voters (where parking is available at the venue) – this ensures that disabled voters can park as close as possible to the polling station

a large print version of the ballot papers (for reference purposes only)

Voters with sight loss may use apps on their mobile phones or carry pocket-sized assistive equipment, such as video magnifiers to help them read documents. These could be used in conjunction with the template. The Returning Officer may also have provided magnifying glasses to support voting without assistance. If a voter is unable to mark a ballot paper themselves because they have a disability, the Presiding Officer or a companion can mark it for them. The voter must tell the polling station staff that this is how they want to vote and the reason why. If a companion marks the ballot paper for a voter, they will be asked to fill in a form. A companion cannot assist more than two electors to vote at an election. Electors can contact the Returning Officer to explain any specific access needs that they have. As a result, there may be extra equipment in certain polling stations where the Returning Officer has allocated specific equipment to meet those access needs.

What are Tellers? Tellers stand outside polling stations and record the elector numbers of people who have voted. They can then identify likely supporters who have not voted yet and encourage them to vote before the close of poll. Tellers have no legal status and voters can refuse to give information to them.

What happens after polls close? Polls close at 10pm. Any voters waiting in a queue at their polling station at 10pm will be allowed to vote, even if they haven't been issued with their ballot paper(s) yet. Once all voters who have been issued with ballot paper(s) have voted, the Presiding Officer must seal the ballot box. Candidates, agents and polling agents can also add their own seal if they want to. The Presiding Officer must then complete a number of official forms: the ballot paper account (which states how many ballot papers were issued) the list of voters with disabilities assisted by companions the list of votes marked by the Presiding Officer the statement of the number of voters whose votes were marked by the Presiding Officer the list of tendered votes the Evaluation Form (VIDEF) the Ballot Paper Refusal List (BPRL)

Duty to maintain secrecy in the polling station Anyone attending a polling station must maintain the secrecy of the ballot. In particular, the following information must not be disclosed: the name or electoral number of who has or has not voted the number or other unique identifying mark on a ballot paper

Anyone attending a polling station must not try to determine how a voter has voted or who they are about to vote for. A polling agent can mark off on their copy of the register of electors those voters who have applied for ballot papers. If the polling agent leaves the polling station during the hours of polling, they must leave the marked copy of the register in the polling station to ensure that secrecy requirements are not breached. Any person found guilty of breaching the secrecy requirements can face an unlimited fine, or may be imprisoned for up to six months.

Observing the verification and count You are entitled to attend the verification and count. You are only permitted to observe the process. You are

not allowed to enter the restricted area where staff count the votes. Returning Officers have the right to limit the number of observers who may be present at any one time during the verification and count. The RO is responsible for verifying and counting the votes cast in their area. They are responsible for declaring the results of any local council elections and any local area mayoral elections. The RO will be able to tell you when and where the counts will take place. Who can attend the count? The following people are entitled by law to attend the verification and count: Returning Officers and their staff candidates plus one guest election agents (or a sub-agent on their behalf) counting agents Electoral Commission representatives observers accredited by the Electoral Commission any other person permitted by the RO The RO may allow representatives of the media to attend the verification and count. They must not interfere with the process or compromise the secrecy of the vote. What do counting agents do? Counting agents have a number of important roles to play at the count: they observe the counting process and make sure that it is accurate they can draw to the attention of count staff any doubtful ballot papers if they disagree with a decision by the RO to reject a ballot paper, they can ask the RO to mark on the ballot paper "rejection objected to" if a count is suspended for any reason, counting agents can add their seals when the RO seals the ballot boxes and envelopes What is verification? After polling stations close at 10pm the ballot boxes will be delivered to the count venue. Postal ballot papers previously received and opened will also be brought to the venue in sealed ballot boxes. All ballot papers must then be verified. Verification has two main purposes: to make sure and show that all ballot papers issued at polling stations and all the returned postal ballot papers have been brought to the count to provide the figure that should match the result of the count The number of ballot papers in each box are counted and will be compared with the number on the ballot paper account. If the number of ballot papers in each box matches the ballot paper account the verification of that box is complete. If the numbers do not match, the ballot papers will be recounted and the documentation checked again. This process will continue until the RO is satisfied as to the actual number of ballot papers to be included in the count. How are the votes counted? After the verification stage is complete, the RO must mix the polling station and postal vote ballot papers before the votes are sorted and counted. The ballot papers should be kept face upwards and be visible at all times to any candidates, agents and observers present. Any doubtful ballot papers should be placed aside for adjudication. Staff will count the number of votes at each election cast for each candidate. Where more than one candidate is to be elected in a ward, ROs may use different methods to establish the votes cast for each candidate, for example, by using counting sheets. The candidate(s) with the most votes are elected. The RO will make a declaration stating who has been elected after each contest has been counted. What are doubtful ballot papers? A doubtful ballot paper is a ballot paper that has not been completed in accordance with the instructions. During the count, these ballot papers will be placed aside. The RO will adjudicate these ballot papers regularly throughout the count to determine whether the intention of the voter clearly appears on the ballot paper. An announcement will be made that an adjudication on doubtful ballot papers is about to be made. The RO will decide whether each doubtful ballot paper is valid in the presence of candidates, agents and observers. You can attend the adjudication but it will not be delayed if you are not present. The RO will inform those present whether or not each doubtful ballot paper is valid and the reason for their decision. The ROs decision is final and can only be challenged by an election petition. Any doubtful ballot papers that are declared as

valid must be counted and included in the total number of votes cast for the appropriate candidate. A ballot paper will not be counted if it: is unmarked does not contain the official mark contains votes for more candidates than the number of vacancies (local elections) contains more than one vote (mayoral elections) contains any mark or writing that can identify the voter does not indicate the voter's intention with certainty The RO must mark the word "rejected" on any ballot paper that is rejected and must draw up a statement showing the number of ballot papers rejected for these reasons. What happens if candidates have the same number of votes? If two or more candidates have the same number of votes, the Returning Officer must decide between them by drawing lots. Duty to maintain secrecy Anyone attending the count has a duty to maintain the secrecy of the count. In particular, anyone attending must not: ascertain or attempt to ascertain number or other unique identifying mark on the back of any ballot paper communicate any information obtained at the count as to the candidate for whom any vote is given on any particular ballot paper Submitting feedback We welcome feedback from your electoral observations which you can submit using our feedback form. If you want to submit feedback on these elections, the deadline for feedback to be considered is 9 June 2023. Feedback may be shared with relevant Returning Officers to help improve the running of elections and the observer scheme. You may find it helpful to print a copy of the feedback form in advance to take with you when observing. If you would like to send feedback in a different format please email [observers@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:observers@electoralcommission.org.uk).