

## **Making elections transparent:**

### **Tips for Returning Officers: Working with national TV news broadcasters at Count Events**

## Overview

This guide has been produced by the Electoral Commission in partnership with the BBC, ITN and Sky. It does not replace the official guidance for Returning Officers on the [Commission's website](#), which is regularly updated before scheduled electoral events and contains more detail and advice on some of the issues highlighted in this guide.

Instead, this guide is designed to provide some quick hints and tips on ways Returning Officers and their staff, along with local authority communication teams, can work effectively with broadcasters at election or referendum count events when approached to do so. It can also be used to help inform your advance planning, particularly when you think there may be significant media interest at a particular count.

A large media presence at a count can increase the pressure of the night, placing additional stress on facilities, space and staff. At the same time, the presence of broadcast media helps to tell the story of election/referendum night. It also provides opportunities to highlight the good work done in your area to prepare and deliver electoral events and, most importantly, it means that voters can see what is happening, raising awareness about the result.

Finally, this guide also highlights some steps you can take to support the communications work the Commission does nationally, which in turn, should help alleviate some of the demands on your time locally.

## **BEFORE POLLING DAY:**

### **TIP 1 – Share your estimated declaration times and count locations with the Electoral Commission as early as possible**

Before each major national poll, the Electoral Commission collates estimated declaration times and count locations from each local authority. Broadcasters will typically be working towards an electoral event for up to six months; the earlier they have sight of this, the longer lead time they have to prepare their broadcasters and the more notice you will have if they would like to attend your count.

When the poll closes at 10pm, the early part of the evening will usually be peak viewing hours for audiences at home, keenly interested in the first results. If your area is likely to be amongst those first to return, broadcasters may have greater interest in attending the count venue and/or being in close contact with your media team.

We appreciate that in some circumstances, depending on when the date of the poll is known, it may take some time to finalise count venues. We also know that estimating your declaration time can be difficult. However, taking a view on this as early as possible will help inform your wider planning and is in line with the guidance for RO's on our website. Sharing the information with the Commission as early as possible will also help the broadcasters and should reduce the number of calls your media teams will have to take requesting the information directly.

### **TIP 2 – Nominate a single media liaison manager**

Identifying a single media liaison manager to handle most of the enquiries from broadcasters will enable simpler communication. It could also reduce the need for multiple (and time-consuming) conversations whilst you are busy with other count activities whilst minimising the risk of mixed messages if different members of staff pick up these queries. If your nominated lead asks for a single point of contact at each of the national broadcasters, they will also do what they can to accommodate this.

### **TIP 3 – Agree accreditation requirements as early as possible**

Accreditation requirements for a count event are an important part of maintaining security and safety; however, different requirements at different locations across the UK at any given time can get extremely onerous for broadcasters. In the case of a

UK Parliamentary General Election for example, with up to 500 members of staff working per broadcaster, this can lead to errors and can create frustrating situations for both you and them on the evening.

To help the event run as smoothly as possible, try to share your local requirements with the broadcasters as early as possible – including highlighting any deadlines they must meet. When setting deadlines also keep in mind that the locations of final broadcast teams may be set fairly late in the process (including on polling day itself), so as much flexibility on this as possible will also be appreciated.

As a result, it's worth considering any simplifications you can make to the process for granting access to broadcasters: for example, will just a name and photo ID be sufficient instead of bespoke accreditation? It's also worth considering that early access to the venue may be needed to set up equipment – so it's worth getting your media liaison manager to have these conversations as early as they can.

#### **TIP 4 – Decide early what information you will make available on the night and how you'll share this**

It's really important when your media liaison manager is talking to the broadcasters that they know what information you will be making available at your count and in what format. This should include what you are doing not just with the final results, but also information like the early turnout data post verification (not just the final figure announced with the result), which you should be prepared to share as well.

Irrespective of what information you will be sharing, what is key is that everyone knows where to obtain it, so that voters can receive the information they need about progress and the final results.

So whether it's pinning a notice up on a board, using a screen to display information, or declaring information from the stage, decide early what you will do and make sure everyone is clear about this either before they arrive or as soon as they get there on the night. It will help broadcast teams plan their approach and reduce the number of questions your team gets about this on the night.

**REMEMBER:** In addition to any formal announcements/declarations you make from the stage, you should also make hard copies of each result available for the broadcasters at the same time as your spokesperson is on stage to aid accurate reporting.

## ON THE NIGHT OF THE COUNT:

### **TIP 5 – Introduce your spokesperson to the media**

The start of the count event can be a busy time, however introducing your spokesperson to broadcasters will be helpful. If it's likely that there will be a large media presence at your venue it may even be helpful to hold a short, private media briefing at the start of the evening to cover essential information, including a reminder of what you have already said your approach will be regarding the provision of information.

In addition, remember your media liaison manager can only be in one place at once, so if you have multiple broadcasters at your count identify other team members to help deal with the broadcasters and ensure these members of staff can be clearly identified (visual prompts, like coloured lanyards, can help here).

### **TIP 6 – Clearly communicate any changes to your plans**

There will always be things that happen to disrupt your plans. For example, you may have been intending to display information on a screen that has stopped working. If this happens the key is to make a clear decision about what you will now do instead and make sure this is communicated properly to everyone that needs to know. If there's an issue that falls outside of contingency plans and will take time to resolve or if there are unexpected delays in the count process, let everyone know that you are working on it and continue to provide updates so the media at the count can keep their programme teams informed.

### **TIP 7 – Advise broadcasters when an announcement is imminent**

If you are about to make an announcement from the stage, allow time for your media liaison manager to let the broadcast teams know a few minutes beforehand. This will give them a chance to let their programme producers know, so that they can cut to your venue in good time if they wish to do so.

Be clear with the media about what is being announced – it might be turnout and the outcome of verification, the result or, in the case of a mayoral election, the result of the count of first preference votes.

### **TIP 8 – Remember the audience is not just the room**

When making an announcement from the stage, it's critical that spokespeople speak clearly. This includes pausing if there is a loud noise in the room so that viewers at home can hear what you are saying, in addition to the people in the room. You may need to repeat the declaration so that those in attendance and those at home are able to hear the detail clearly.

**Additional request from the Press Association: Remember to include other media representatives**

The Press Association (PA) provides elections data to a wide range of the media in the UK and abroad, including TV broadcasters such as the BBC, ITN and Sky. PA needs to be able to provide fast and accurate results as soon as possible after a declaration is made. Even though the TV broadcasters will transmit a result live as a declaration is being made at a count where they have a broadcast team, PA has a key role in validation and back-up of the result.

PA has requested that you should remember to include other media representatives in your plans. PA's correspondent may be the representative of a local newspaper or agency or they may be a private individual.

A key point: the broadcasters have asked that you should make hard copies of each result available for them at the same time as your spokesperson is on stage. It would be very helpful if you also would provide hard copies to other media representatives immediately that the declaration has been made, which would assist with the speed and accuracy of reporting.