

The Election Count and the Role of the Counting Agents

Thank you for agreeing to be a counting agent. It is an important task in this election. I hope this document tells you the main points you need to know.

The Process

Polling stations close at 10 pm, after which the staff need to clear and close up, and then transfer all the election paraphernalia back to the hall where the count takes place. This is normally in the Woodville Halls but has had to be moved to the Cascades Leisure Centre in Thong Lane, DA12 4LG. The Electoral Services team have asked that we keep out of the way, perhaps in the cafe, until the ballot boxes have arrived since the route into the counting hall is a bit tight. They will let us know when we can come into the hall, probably between 10.30 and 11.00 pm. So, please aim to arrive by 10.30 pm.

There are two main stages in a count, the verification and the count proper. There is work to be done at both stages. I am currently working on a tally sheet for the verification stage and will give you more information about this nearer the time. However, please bring a pen and, if you have a clipboard, that will make things a bit easier.

Please stay on the other side of the desks from those counting the votes. Do not touch any ballot paper in any circumstances. By all means point out if a paper has fallen on the floor but leave the mechanics to the council staff. If you have any concerns about what has happened, please speak to me, as the agent, immediately.

STAGE I – VERIFICATION

During verification, the votes are only sorted into batches and counted, to ensure that the number tallies with the number of votes recorded from that polling station. At this stage, ballot papers should be kept face up. If they are counted face down, protest strongly. As staff open the ballot papers and count them into bundles, we can get an impression of where we have most support.

On the tally sheet, make a note of the code letter(s) of the ballot box. If you missed them saying this, they won't mind you asking and the ballot boxes are just behind the counters. In total, there will be around 55 ballot boxes, and we are interested to see the distribution of our votes between the different polling districts. We are not specifically trying to count all our votes at this stage, but we are interested in how many we have in a few key wards - Meopham South and Vigo, Meopham North, Pelham, Central and Woodlands. I will put a note on the tally sheets with an indication of where we are most interested. However, the polling districts concerned are:

A	Pelham	B	Pelham	C	Pelham	CF	Meopham
CG	Meopham	CH	Culverstone	CI/ CJ	Vigo	CK	Harvel
J	Central	K	Central	L	Central		
M	Woodlands	N	Woodlands	O	Woodlands		

Some codes have more than one letter, as you see. However, where one letter is given, we are only interested in that box. For example, A is Pelham but we don't need to know about AA, AB and AC. If you notice any other areas where we seem to be picking up more votes, then make a note of this.

We have to try to note this at the verification stage because, at the next stage, the papers get mixed up and postal votes are included. It will be most useful if votes for all parties are recorded, but please just do a sample of up to 100. There are likely to be some spoilt or doubtful votes but don't worry about that at this stage. We just need to get an impression of what is happening.

STAGE 2 – THE COUNT PROPER

These are the key tasks:

- Make sure no Liberal Democrat votes go onto the Labour or Conservative piles. Don't worry if a Tory or Labour vote goes onto our pile or that of the Greens. It is up to the other parties to spot that, just as they won't say if any of our votes go on the wrong pile.
- Make sure that there are no more than the required number of ballot papers (they will count in bundles of 25 or 50) in a Lib Dem bundle.
- Make sure that our main opponents' bundles always have at least 25 (or 50) in them.
- Identify any potentially spoiled papers going on an opponents' pile. If you spot any of these, politely bring them to the attention of the counter who will either correct their mistake or recount the bundle. I have attached a separate document, called 'dodgy ballot papers', so you can see what is and is not acceptable.

The Electoral Services Team at Gravesham are very efficient and methodical. They will take any disputes about the count seriously. Any doubtful papers will be put to one side. The Returning Officer will call the agents together to see as he adjudicates on these.

Generally, I will be on hand to help with any difficulties. If there are any queries before election night, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I know we can all think of things we would prefer to do in the middle of a December night than this, so thank you very much for agreeing to take part.

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