

**NORTHUMBERLAND**

Northumberland County Council

# **2017 County and Parish Elections**

**Thursday 4 May**

**Briefing Note for Candidates and Agents**

## Foreword

The administration of all-out county and parish elections across an area the size of Northumberland is a massive undertaking. To achieve success, I am committed to providing the necessary resources and have a strong team working on my behalf. Whilst I am confident of full success, I do not take this challenge lightly. I acknowledge the range of difficulties, both expected and unforeseen, that will present both us as administrators and candidates as stakeholders with various difficulties to overcome before the final results are declared.



My primary concern in the delivery of these polls is to arrive at sound results across all contests and to accurately reflect the democratic expression of the people of Northumberland. Secondary only to this is the firm objective of ensuring a good customer experience for all participants, be they electors casting their ballots or candidates standing for election.

It is with the quality of customer experience in mind that I issue this briefing note to both county and parish council election candidates. The aim here is to highlight certain key considerations for candidates, identifying opportunities for candidates to support voters and managing candidates' expectations at the points at which they or their representatives will come into contact with electoral process.

This note should be read in conjunction with the information booklet I have published, which gives the fine detail of the various electoral processes (the what, the when and the how). Together, these two documents should provide all the information candidates require to enable them to engage fully and appropriately in these polls. Whilst further inquiry is welcomed on subjects not already covered, it is hoped that these documents will be treated by all as a first port of call when questions arise.

I am grateful to all candidates who have made the commitment to stand in the interests of local people and who seek service in public office. I hope that their experience at these polls is positive and wish everyone a positive and successful campaign.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Paul'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written on a light-colored background.

**Geoff Paul**  
**Returning Officer**

# Briefing Note

## Postal voting

### Last minute return of postal vote packs

There is an option to deliver completed postal vote packs to a polling station on election day. Any voter needing to resort to this means of return should be advised that packs can only be returned to a station within the relevant County division. If they attempt to return to a station in the wrong area their pack cannot be accepted by the presiding officer.

Royal Mail are contracted to conduct a sweep of their mail sorting centre on election night to identify any postal vote packs that have entered but not yet cleared through the postal system. This facilitates the return of items entering the mail system very late in proceedings but offers no guarantee that items posted late will be received in time.

Whilst offering a last chance to postal voters who have not acted early enough, these two provisions should be regarded as a last resort. In both instances, these late returns will delay proceedings at the count whilst packs are taken through the postal vote opening security process. In the interest of all those attending or participating at the count, postal voters should be urged to return their completed postal vote pack as soon as possible.

### Handling of postal vote packs

Candidates, their agents and anyone involved in their campaigns are urged not to handle postal vote packs either before or after they have been completed by voters. Whilst not a legal proscription, the Electoral Commission strongly advises this approach.

The handling of packs by those involved in political campaigns opens those individuals up to criticism should it be construed as an attempt to interfere with ballot papers. We do not doubt that such handling would occur only with voters' best interests in mind and to facilitate return but it is best to guard against any potential for criticism and avoid this contact entirely.

### Lost and spoilt postal vote packs

Should a voter report that they have lost, spoilt or never received their postal vote pack, they can request a replacement by contacting electoral services. This can only be done from Thursday 27 April onwards. If you receive such a report, the voter should be instructed to contact electoral services directly to make the necessary arrangements.

### Postal vote opening agents

Candidates may appoint postal vote opening agents to scrutinise the opening and of postal vote packs and the verification of the security statements completed by voters. The number of these agents is limited to just one per candidate at any session at any one time.

With the number of candidates across the two elections, the number of people entitled to attend postal vote opening is huge and presents a potential risk to the process in terms of crowding. It is strongly urged for candidates to concert their efforts, either by party, constituency office or parish council to provide joint scrutiny of this process and minimise the number in attendance.

Postal vote opening agents' appointment to this process must be notified to Returning Officer no later than the day before the session they wish to attend.

## **Polling stations**

### **Entry to polling stations**

Everyone involved in a candidate's campaign must be made aware of the rules regarding entry to polling stations. Access is very tightly controlled. Full details can be found in the information provided alongside this note and in Electoral Commission guidance. For the smooth running of the polls and the benefit of everyone involved we do not wish to see a single instance of an unauthorised person attempting to enter a station. Please ensure all that those involved with your campaign are familiar with the rules.

### **Tellers**

We issue supplemental local guidance in respect of tellers. This provides additional stipulation from the Returning Officer in light of local issues experienced in the past and will be provided directly to tellers by presiding officers on the day. Tellers should be made fully aware in advance of the guidance issued by the Electoral Commission and must heed the information issued by the Returning Officer and any instruction from presiding officers. Only one teller should be present at each station on behalf of each candidate. This is a strict limit.

### **Polling agents**

Each candidate may appoint as many polling agents as they wish but may only deploy one to each station at any one time. Again, this is a strict limit. Appointments must be made by no later than Wednesday 26 April. Details of these agents will be provided to the relevant polling stations. All polling agents must be made aware of the requirements of secrecy provided under separate cover.

### **Affixing seals to ballot boxes**

Candidates/polling agents may affix their seal to polling station ballot boxes at the close of poll. If this activity is planned, it must be carried out immediately following the close of poll at 10pm without delay. Presiding officers are instructed not to let this activity unduly delay their departure to return polling materials to the count and will not wait if the individual is not ready at the allotted time to affix their seal.

Where a seal is affixed to a box, opportunity will be given to scrutinise the seal before it is broken and the box opened. It is the candidate's responsibility to ensure that someone is on hand to witness this. If the opportunity is missed, the Returning Officer will accept no liability in this.

## **Verification and Count**

### **Timing**

The verification for both county and parish elections will take place on Thursday 4 May and will commence at 10.30pm. We will count all county divisions the same night and anticipate completing this process by approximately 5am.

In order to give key personnel a much needed break after 24 hours continuous activity, we will count parish ballot papers on Saturday 6 May. Whilst this delays the parish results, it is necessary to ensure the full capacity of the core human resources on which the process depends.

## **Location**

All county divisions and parish councils will be verified and counted at a single location, Hexham Wentworth Leisure Centre. In the past, three separate count events were conducted at locations across the county. The change to a single venue greatly increases the resilience of our count procedures, maintains intact the key electoral services human resource and ensures a greater degree of Returning Officer control. Whilst less physically accessible, the risks associated with the count are greatly reduced as a result.

## **Combined verification**

In verifying the numbers of ballot papers entering the count from polling stations and postal vote opening, we are required to verify all ballot papers across both county and parish elections at the same time. On completion of this verification process, county papers (white) will proceed to counting whilst parish papers (yellow) will be secured and stored until the parish count on Saturday 6 May.

The combined verification event means that a great many individuals are entitled to attend the event. In reality not all will, but there is still significant potential for crowding on the count floor. All those in attendance are requested to be mindful of this issue. Once an electoral area in which the individual has a stake has been verified (if parish) or counted and declared (if county) they are asked to vacate the count floor in order to ease crowding. A candidates' lounge will provide seating and an area in which to relax away from the count floor.

## **Count agents**

Candidates at both elections are entitled to appoint one count agent to assist them in scrutinising the conduct of the verification and count. An appointment form providing these details must be submitted no later than Wednesday 26 April.

## **Sharing results/requests for recounts**

Once count team supervisors are satisfied with the accuracy of the figures they have established, these will be shared informally with candidates or their election agents. This provides an opportunity for the provisional result to be challenged and any request for a recount to be made.

Recounts are granted entirely at the Returning Officer's discretion. Where the margin of a result is not especially narrow, a request for a recount will need to be justified in the context of a significant procedural abnormality or issue. If the Returning Officer is not satisfied that a full recount is justified, it may be that other, more proportional measures can be employed to increase candidates' confidence in the result.

## **Result information**

Once results are agreed informally, the Returning Officer will proceed to formal declaration. This will be made over a public address system.

We aim to make the details of results as accessible as possible, both for those in attendance at the count events and those who are unable to attend and wish to keep track of proceedings from home. To this end we will be publishing results to the Council's webpages immediately following declaration as well as sending alerts to followers of the Council's social media profiles. Information screens will also be present at the count venue to help those in attendance keep track of both individual results and the overall picture as it emerges during the course of the night.

## Spending returns and covering declarations

The Returning Officer's role does not extend beyond taking receipt of spending returns and declarations. The Returning Officer and their staff cannot give advice to candidates on the completion of their return and directs them to the guidance issued by the Electoral Commission.

It is deemed within the Returning Officer's remit, however, to remind candidates of the deadlines for the submission of spending returns. These are as follows:

<b>Election</b>	<b>Submission of spending return</b>	<b>Submission of candidate declaration</b>
Parish	Not later than Tuesday 1 June	Must accompany spending return
County	Not later than Wednesday 9 June	Within 7 days of submitting spending return

All candidates, at both contested and uncontested elections, are reminded that even in the absence of having incurred any spending, they must still submit a 'nil' return .

## Conduct

We know that a great deal and time, effort and expense goes into candidates' campaigns and that a lot rests on the outcome of these elections. It is vital therefore that these polls are allowed to proceed in the absence of unnecessary distractions of the type that arise when the conduct of campaigns falls short of legal requirements or the expected standard for behaviour and conduct.

The Electoral Commission issue comprehensive guidance to candidates to support their campaigns. It is the candidate's' own responsibility to ensure they read, comprehend and fully reflect this guidance in their campaigns and that all those involved on their behalf know their own role and the rules they must observe. Particular care should be taken to ensure that tellers, polling agents, postal vote opening agents and count agents are well informed.

It goes without saying that all those involved will comport themselves well and uphold the principles of respect, dignity, inclusion and equality.

Where issues of conduct or legality do arise, it is expected that any reports to the Returning Officer will be made in a concise, robust and well evidenced manner. In such instances, the Returning Officer will consider the circumstances and facts and will make a decision as to whether or not the issue warrants passing on the either the Electoral Commission or the police. We would expect such instances to be relatively few and far between. The time and resources required to investigate complaints of this nature represent a significant burden on the Returning Officer and their staff and therefore a risk to the election. Candidates and all those involved in campaigns are asked to remember that such complaints should not be made lightly.