**The Association of Electoral Administrators**

# AEA COUNT REVIEW REPORT

# COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Report compiled by:**

**Peter Stanyon, Chief Executive**
**Laura Lock, Deputy Chief Executive**

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# Health check report on Cotswold District Council's election count processes

## Introduction

The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) undertakes health checks as a service to members and their employing local authorities. These checks align with the Association's objectives, specifically to foster the advancement of consistent and efficient administration of electoral registration and the conduct of elections.

This health check only considers elements related to the delivery of count processes.

It was carried out by Peter Stanyon, AEA Chief Executive, who has more than three decades experience in delivering electoral services in local authorities, and Laura Lock, AEA Deputy Chief Executive, who has worked in electoral services for over 17 years.

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## Background

The information below relates to Cotswold District Council (CDC) at the time the health check was undertaken and is pertinent to this report.

- The council runs counts for one UK Parliamentary constituency: The Cotswolds.

- There are 32 council wards electing 34 councillors every four years.

- The council also run elections for Gloucestershire County Council and all parish and town councils in their area. It also administers other polls as necessary, such as Neighbourhood Planning Referendums and ballots for Business Improvement Districts.

The council has recently recruited a new chief executive who will assume responsibilities after the May polls.

Until the arrival of the new chief executive, Jan Britton, managing director of Publica, the council's organisational management service, has been appointed as the Council's Returning Officer (RO).

Mr Britton has also been appointed as Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) and accordingly acts as Acting Returning Officer (ARO) for any UK Parliamentary elections held within the Cotswold District Council area.

Mr Britton, by virtue of his appointment as RO for Cotswold District Council, also acts as the Counting Officer at local referendums and Local Counting Officer for national referendums.

# Theme One – planning and count preparations

## 1.1 Verification and count venue

### Location

The verification and count for all polls takes place at Cotswold Leisure Centre in Cirencester.

This venue brings many benefits including being a council owned building, offering good access for ballot box drop off and having sufficient space for up to 80 count assistants. However, it does have the drawback of being located towards the south of the district which means it is some distance from many polling stations.

### Detailed count plan

While we saw a basic layout of the count, we would suggest drafting a detailed count layout plan. This would ensure all attendees have clarity about where specific ballot boxes and electoral areas will be counted.

If space allows, the use of a detailed ballot box plan might prove helpful and avoid the risk of an empty ballot box being placed on top of a box containing votes waiting to be counted. The plan should set out where boxes brought to supervisory staff are placed, where boxes being verified are placed and, more importantly, where empty ballot boxes are placed.

## 1.2 Dates and times

### Thursday night counts

CDC has traditionally held overnight election counts.

While legislation requires the sortation of votes to begin within four hours of the close of poll at a UK Parliamentary election, there are no such requirements for local polls.

We never advocate change for changes sake but would advise that thought be given to the merits of next day counting, particularly as the 2021 County Council and Police and Crime Commission election count is expected to start the day after the poll.

If CDC adopted this approach, all ballot boxes would be in place before the verification began. There would also be no delays waiting for ballot boxes, which is currently causing inefficiencies. 2021 is the ideal opportunity to look at the merits and drawbacks of changing local election count timing.

## 1.3 Staffing

### Review of staff

From our conversations, recruiting sufficient staff can be a difficulty for CDC. Count assistants are a mix of internal and external appointments and vary in experience. Count supervisors also include some external staff, but largely take on the role year on year.

It is clear there are significant variations in ability amongst both count assistants and supervisors. We would recommend undertaking a detailed review of all count employees and implementing a performance monitoring system going forward.

### Recruitment

Whenever there is a need for new count assistants, we would suggest running a straightforward practical test prior to accepting them for the role. We know of ROs who run mock ballot paper counts, and give count supervisors template forms to complete, to ensure applicants have a clear understanding of what is required of them prior to their appointment.

When recruiting, it is important staff understand the restrictions placed on them regarding assisting election candidates or political parties. We are aware all recruitment documentation already includes this information, but we recommend revisiting the wording to ensure all staff are clear on these constraints.

### Wider Publica Support

The benefit of arrangements with Publica include a pool of resource available to the RO. If the count staff review identifies that new staff are required, we would expect support can be given from Publica.

### Training

We believe a more comprehensive training programme should be introduced, addressing several issues:

*Multi-member counts*

Given most wards are single member, not all count assistants and supervisors undertake multi-member counts.

We would suggest that teams due to be responsible for these areas, including parish councils, are identified in advance of polling day. Count assistants should then be given written instructions before attending mandatory training. This training should be practical and allow them to trial all elements of the process.

*Count Assistants*

Count assistants are required to be at the count by 21:45, to then be briefed by their supervisor. From discussions, it is unclear whether this briefing always takes place.

Going forward, we feel count assistants should arrive earlier, e.g. to be sat at their count table by 21:30, and the RO or DRO give an overview briefing. This would include all basic points and should then be supplemented by each supervisor adding any additional relevant details for their team, checking they have all understood what is expected of them.

*Count Supervisors*

We believe all count supervisors should be trained in advance of polling day to enable them to confidently undertake all elements of any count. Upskilling all supervisors would increase resilience and allow for a more flexible process at the count.

### Clarity of role and defined authorisation

The previous CDC RO was heavily involved in all aspects of each election, especially the count. With an interim RO and further change ahead in 2021, it is vital there are clearly defined roles for all senior count staff, including count supervisors, control staff, deputy returning officers (DROs) and any count manager.

Clear job descriptions give clarity on remit and further reassurance to the RO about when and what individuals need to refer to them, defining the parameters of how much authority each position has to make decisions.

There should also be a clear chart showing reporting lines and how all count staff sit within the overall structure. From a resilience perspective, this should include clear instruction from the RO about who would take on overarching responsibility for the count were they to become incapacitated.

It is also vital there are clear communications between the RO and DROs before, during, and after the count. Depending upon the level of delegation in place, thought should also be given to the number of deputies at the count and their remit.

### Count supervisors managing count assistants

It is important to ensure a full complement of staff at the count. We recommend count supervisors contact their counting assistants in the week before poll to confirm they have received their appointments and are attending on the night of the count. This would also give them opportunity to check each staff member's experience, ensure they have

received and read their written instructions and give any necessary reminders.

## 1.4 Count method and count forms

***Process Notes***

While process notes exist for some areas, we would recommend these are reviewed to ensure they are up to date and to identify any gaps.

Detailed process notes give clarity and reassurance that any aspect of a count can be undertaken even if key personnel are unavailable.

We would specifically recommend ensuring process notes cover:

- Job descriptions for every role.
- Detailed process notes for all aspects of the count, including:
  - ballot box reception
  - unused ballot papers
  - the verification
  - first past the post and multi-member counts
  - the sign off process for provisional and agreed results and post-count procedures
  - business continuity plans
  - scenario planning including evacuation processes
  - a venue layout
  - a structure of reporting lines and responsibilities.

***Count structure***

CDC counts currently use eight teams of ten count assistants. This number should be sufficient to produce a timely result.

Staff are used flexibly within these teams, and supervisors split teams into smaller groups depending upon the size of a ballot box.

We believe this is a good method when employed effectively, but question whether all supervisors have the necessary knowledge to make the necessary decisions on a ballot box by ballot box basis.

We also question the role of count supervisor. We feel they are under resourced, bringing delays. As we understand it, each supervisor is:

- managing ten count assistants split between one and four teams at any time.
- opening ballot boxes and distributing them to count assistants, and ensuring candidates and agents are satisfied boxes are empty.
- relaying verification figures to the control table for each ballot box.
- instigating any recount.
- completing all necessary verification paperwork.

- aggregating ballot papers into mini count boxes and completing all necessary paperwork.
- supervising mini counts and completing all necessary count paperwork, including aggregating multi-member count sheets.

While being clear there is not one 'correct' size for a count team, we believe lessons can be learned from other counts.

All UK Parliamentary constituencies that declared before midnight in 2019 primarily worked on the following model:

- Each team is made up of nine count assistants working as three groups of three. This figure is based on extensive analysis carried out by several councils in the north east to calculate maximum efficiency.
- Each supervisor has an assistant and, if running a multi-seat count, an additional resource for aggregating totals.
- Each supervisor is given the ballot paper account totals so there is no need to make repeated trips to the control table.

We feel CDC's count efficiency would be improved by decreasing the overall number of count assistants by eight and instead using these staff to support supervisors.

Assistant supervisors largely have the same remit as count supervisors – to ensure all count assistants are working and minimise any downtime.

### *Local election counts – order of wards*

We believe there is merit in considering verifying then immediately counting eight of the wards in and around Cirencester before any other wards are verified.

This structure would allow time for remaining boxes to be returned from further across the district, while the count for the first eight wards is carried out.

Once a result is declared the count team can move on to other wards in an agreed order, with the location of these verifications and counts announced or pre-allocated based on the ROs preference.

This should bring significant efficiency, clarity for candidates and agents and offset the impact of geography.

### Allocation of staff

There is an accepted variation in the quality of count assistants and supervisors. At present some teams are acknowledged as exemplary while others struggle.

The distribution of resources has seen strong count assistant and supervisors left together to give the previous RO teams they are confident can handle ballot papers efficiently and effectively.

While there is merit in numerous structures, we feel distributing experienced count assistants throughout teams allows them to support and improve less experienced counters.

Equally, placing the best count supervisors between other supervisors with less experience or recognised development needs, means they can act as mentors.

### Breaks

We have no evidence of the number or length of breaks for count staff but had reports that these delay the count at various stages.

While it is important employment legislation is followed, as count staff have not worked in polling stations, we believe a review of the frequency and length of breaks could allow more timely declarations. With careful planning, the counting process can continue uninterrupted while still allowing staff to take necessary breaks.

### Record keeping

At present relatively basic spreadsheets are constructed for the count.

We have not seen records from the ballot box reception, but are aware they exist, we believe only as paper copy.

We have not seen records from the unused and spoilt ballot paper verification, but are aware they exist, we believe only as paper copy.

The verification spreadsheet is printed out and completed on paper, with only final verification totals entered into the spreadsheet.

There are basic count spreadsheets, but these largely meet the needs of the RO.

Going forward, we suggest that a spreadsheet 'expert' is employed to design a more sophisticated system encompassing all necessary record keeping. They could also pull totals across for verification statements and result sheets. Checks and balances can be in place and cells locked to prevent accidental errors being made.

At the count we would hope these sheets could be networked to show live changes as they are made, with the author available to supply expert knowledge.

We believe this would benefit the efficiency of the count and give the RO vital data in CDC's drive for continuous improvement.

## 1.5 Verification and count communications

### *Communications*

The primary issue we have identified during this health check is communication.

While we are confident there are generally clear processes and procedures in place, it is acknowledged that communicating these to candidates and agents requires improvement.

We would suggest as a minimum that:

- The structure and process for the count is covered in detail for candidates and agents at a briefing in advance of polling day, giving them a clear overview of how the count will run.
- Candidates and agents are provided with a written count plan before the count begins showing where each polling station will be verified and each electoral area counted.
- Having a written plan should negate the need for each area to be announced over the public address system, if combined with count supervisors displaying clear signage showing which ballot box or electoral area is being verified or counted.
- Clear announcements are made relating to the adjudication of doubtful ballot papers and consultation over provisional results.
- Verification statements are proactively given to candidates and agents, or designating a clear contact who can provide them on request.

### *Communication team support*

The service delivered to the RO by the CDC Communication Team means the media do not adversely impact on the running of the count. There is also a clear plan for how media partners receive the information they need.

### *Publication of the result*

Sharing the result of a count with the electorate in a timely fashion is paramount to the communication process. CDC gives sensible and timely access to results once they are agreed, and before they are declared, allowing them to be posted on council social media accounts as soon as they are announced.

# Theme Two – Close of poll and delivery of documentation

## 2.1 Instructions for Presiding Officers

### *Instructions for returning election documentation*

All Presiding Officers (POs) are given clear written instructions about how to package all polling station documentation. From our conversations, it appears that while this is largely adhered to, there are presentation issues from some POs.

Due to the size of the district, some POs bring ballot boxes directly to the count venue while others take them to one of three vans based at set collection points.

Delivery to collection points is common in rural areas and ensures staff are not put off working in polling stations a long way from the count.

It was reported to us that there is often a delay during the verification waiting for the vans to come in, and that when they do arrive, they cause a bottleneck.

We feel further analysis on where vans are positioned and who drops off to them would be beneficial. For example, could more POs north east of Tetbury drive their boxes in? Could there be two vans at each venue, with the first van leaving for the count once 50% of POs have dropped off? Could a greater spread of venues be used? Another alternative is making changes at the count to negate the impact of the vans. We explore this further in section 1.4.

We would also advocate clear record keeping by the reception team in Cirencester and each van regardless of any change. This would identify POs who take longer than expected to leave their stations, enabling remedial action to be taken.

## 2.2 Allocation of ballot boxes to count teams

### *Verification start time*

We believe a transparent and organised count that delivers an accurate result is more important than the time a result is declared. However, we also believe in finding efficiencies where possible.

An issue raised on several occasions was delays in beginning the verification because no ballot boxes had been received, excluding the postal votes verified at 22:00.

Further work on which boxes will arrive first and where to allocate them could bring efficiencies, as assistants are not waiting for ballot papers.

### *Work of the control staff*

Staff working on the two control tables are experienced and have a detailed understanding of their role.

We feel that were the current staff unavailable, this could have a major impact on the count. We would recommend detailed process notes be developed for this role.

The responsibilities control staff have for the number of polling stations in CDC are, in our opinion, too great and are causing delays as a result.

*Releasing boxes*

At present, the control table do not release any ballot boxes to the count floor before they have checked and entered the ballot paper account into the verification schedule.

While understanding the reasoning behind this, it is reportedly creating significant delays.

We believe, as mentioned in section 3.2, count supervisors should be given ballot paper account totals to make the verification more efficient. Ballot boxes should go straight to the relevant team. Ballot paper accounts can go to the control table who as a matter of urgency check the accuracy of the account and complete a card stating the ballot box number and number of ballot papers it should contain. A runner can then give this to the supervisor. Once this is done, the control team can input the ballot paper account figures into the verification spreadsheet.

*Announcing the location of each box*

At present, control staff announce where each box is being verified.

If the suggestions we have made relating to written plans for candidates and agents is adopted, this would no longer be necessary.

*Completing the verification spreadsheet*

At present there is a verification spreadsheet which is also printed off as a paper copy.

While we accept the benefits of a paper based back up system, we firmly believe the verification spreadsheet and all count spreadsheets should be completed electronically.

### *Ancillary Staff*

We are aware of a team of ancillary staff who assist with ballot box reception and delivery. While we are unable to comment on the efficiency of the current team, we would recommend ensuring this role is

adequately resourced so count supervisors, control staff and DROs have people on hand as they need them.

# Theme Three – the verification

## 3.1 Ballot paper account

### Information from POs

It is difficult to fully ascertain the quality of ballot paper accounts however, we were told that "the maths is often appalling".

Any issue with ballot paper accounts causes delay. We would advise further training in this area, and for control staff to keep records to enable feedback with those concerned.

### Multiple polling stations in one building

Anecdotally, it appears several ballot boxes must be put on hold during the verification as the number of ballot papers does not match the ballot paper account. These boxes come from stations that share a polling place with another station.

While this problem can never be fully eliminated, it would be worth POs being reminded of the importance of keeping ballot boxes from different stations as far apart as possible. We would also recommend reviewing the layouts of these polling station. This is something polling station inspectors could assist with.

## 3.2 Verification figure

### Sharing ballot paper account figures

While it does not reportedly cause significant delay, we question why count supervisors are not provided with the ballot paper account figure to enable them to know if a verified total is correct.

CDC's count supervisors are trusted with running highly scrutinised counts within their team. Not sharing the ballot paper account figures causes delays and inefficiencies.

### Decision on accepting verified totals

In our experience, most ROs accept a first verification figure that matches the ballot paper account. Figures that do not match require a recount. Usually, if a recount figure matches either the ballot paper account or the first verification figure the total is accepted.

At CDC, where the verification figure does not match that provided on the ballot paper account, even if the number counted in the ballot box is the same on both the first and second verification, we were told that a third count is carried out.

As we did not have access to the verification spreadsheets, we could not fully assess the number of recounts this may be causing, or whether the third figure typically varies.

We would urge the RO to consider whether a third count is merited if a consistent figure has been arrived at, and the number of variances to the ballot paper account is low.

We would also suggest, assuming count supervisors are provided with the ballot paper account figures, that clear parameters are set to make it clear any variance they are permitted to accept and under what circumstances.

Having a written procedure issued by the RO will ensure everyone is working within a range the RO is comfortable with, escalating variances where necessary, and clearly stating the parameters count staff should not exceed.

### *Review of quality of count staff*

Having spoken to some CDC count supervisors, it appears there was a wide variation in the quality of count teams at the 2019 UK Parliamentary count.

For future counts, we would suggest count supervisors are asked to report on issues with any count assistant or highlight any training needs.

We would suggest DROs look to do the same for count supervisors and control staff.

### 3.3 Postal Votes
### *Preventing delays*

It is often the case that high volumes of postal votes handed in at counts can delay the end of the verification and the start of the count.

While it is unclear how much of an issue this is at CDC, it would be worth reviewing the instructions given to the postal vote team to ensure they understand any priorities. This is obviously more relevant for local elections where some wards are scheduled to be counted before others have been verified.

# Theme Four – the count

## 4.1 Count process

### Doubtful ballot papers

*Volume of doubtful ballot papers*

There was mention of some count assistants being overly cautious when pulling out doubtful ballot papers. Count assistants should be given clear training so they only add ballot papers to the doubtful tray when they are unsure about the allocation of a vote, rather than when they think a counting agent might be.

*Responsibility for adjudication*

The previous RO took a significant amount of responsibility at the count. For future counts, there needs to be clear communication on who will adjudicate doubtful papers and under what parameters.

We would suggest allowing count supervisors to pre-sort ballot papers into those they believe should be included in the count and those that should be rejected under each reason. This would mean doubtfuls could be checked by the RO, and DROs if permitted by the RO, and shown to candidates in batches, speeding up the process and making it more transparent.

We would also hope candidates and agents would be satisfied with count supervisors returning ballots to the count that are obviously good but may have been put as doubtful by an overcautious count assistant.

Adjudicating within count teams is a usual process for local elections, but central verification typical for UK Parliamentary polls. Cotswold centrally adjudicate national polls making it easier for candidates and agents to observe proceedings.

It is also worth remembering that only candidates, election agents and counting agents can comment on an ROs decision to reject, or include, a ballot paper at the count. Adjudicating within teams for local elections, while overall beneficial, can make it more difficult to keep track of anyone lodging an official objection to a rejection.

### Multi-seat counting – count method

For multi-seat counts CDC use grass skirts for all ballot papers.

We would recommend a review ahead of the 2023 local elections to determine whether grass skirts are the most effective counting method for CDC.

While we do not advocate one system over any other, we believe an assessment of the various available systems will give the RO the opportunity to consider whether grass skirts are still the preferred option.

We would particularly suggest considering whether block counting would bring additional efficiencies.

### Multi-seat counting – unused votes

Regardless of the system used, we believe that unused votes should be recorded. Keeping a record of unused votes would allow the RO to fully balance ballot papers issued at the end of the count.

Recording the unused votes, especially for parish council counts which often return close results, gives reassurance to all parties at a count. It would also allow count supervisors to be confident each count sheet tallies. For example, a sheet holding 25 ballot papers with two seats available should always balances back to 50 if you add the votes cast for candidates to those the total of unused ones.

### Adjudication of variance

The RO previously agreed any variance found between verified totals and provisional results. This gives the RO oversight on everything, but we question whether this works well at local elections.

Again, detailed process notes should cover all sign-off procedures, including situations where the RO is happy to delegate the decision on sharing a provisional result to a deputy. We feel that empowering deputies within clearly defined parameters is in the interests of an efficient count.

# Theme Five – after the declaration of results

## 5.1 Results

There appears to be a clear process for checking provisional results and signing off the declaration, although we were not shown any written process notes. We recommend having a clear and straightforward document showing the path from a count supervisor right through to the RO making the declaration.

This document should also be shared with candidates and agents at any briefing session so they are clear on when and how provisional results will be shared.

We have not seen a written recount procedure for either first past the post or multi-seat counts. Having a documented recount procedure for various scenarios is important. It supports advanced training for key count staff and provides clear documentation that can be shared with candidates and agents.

## 5.2 Post election paperwork

### *Process notes and layout*

It is vital that all election documentation is securely stored for the period defined in legislation.

Having detailed process notes and an index of which documents are stored where, including a clear layout of the storage facility, would be beneficial.

### *Moving documentation to storage – personnel*

The responsibility for storage of election documentation falls to the core election team. While we understand this may be seen as part of their role, we do not believe this task should be undertaken by key election officers. Immediately after the count, and for the next few days, there are many tasks which need to be completed that are difficult to delegate. The core team should be focusing on these jobs, while document storage should be delegated.

There is an important role to be played from the close of the count right through to final storage. We recommend giving key responsibility for all documentation going into storage to an individual who is not involved in other elements of the process.

The designated person, working with the necessary resources, should receive all used ballot papers from count supervisors at the end of a count, making all necessary checks on seals and labels. They should also check all unused papers are correctly sealed and other documentation, such as corresponding number lists, is present and in good order.

The same individual should assume responsibility for the transfer of documentation to the count and indexing of all polling station packets. Once this is done, the election team can perform checks to make sure they are happy with the storage and sign off the indexing.

It would be for the RO to identify the right person for the task, but we do not recommend it being anyone with any other role at the count or the core election team.

### *Moving documentation to storage – containers*

A present, used ballot papers are put into labelled ballot boxes once the result has been declared. These ballot papers are subsequently move into archive boxes by the core team.

Unused ballot papers are placed into plastic storage boxes by presiding officers and moved to archive boxes after the count has concluded by the core team.

We would suggest that the unused ballot papers are sealed in labelled archive boxes once they have been verified. We would also suggest used ballot papers are placed into labelled archive boxes by the count supervisor once the result is declared.

This would reduce the workload of the core team after the election and ensure all ballot papers, used or unused, are securely stored and clearly labelled.

### *Documentation disposal*

Most election documentation must be stored for 12 months. Once this time limit has expired, documents should be securely disposed of.

We would recommend whoever is responsible for the transportation and storage of documentation is also responsible for supervising its destruction, with oversight from the core election team if necessary.

### 5.3 Post-count review

### *Review meetings*

The previous RO clearly reviewed the count within certain parameters. We recommend count and election reviews take place at all levels.

For example, a review with count supervisors of count assistants, with DROs of count supervisors and control staff, with the ballot box reception manager on ancillary staff. These reports, along with analysis such as that suggested for the verification, can be presented to the RO for review. Conversations with count supervisors and count managers would also cover wider learning points.

We would also advocate giving thought to arranging a review meeting with candidates and agents to collect their wider thoughts about the count and election process.

### *Improvement plan*

When issues with any member of staff are identified, it is unclear how their performance is reviewed or managed, including the decision not to employ them again. A clear performance review process would be helpful for key staff the RO wishes to retain.

## Conclusions

Cotswold District Council has an election team who are committed to delivering counts with accurate results that are arrived at in a transparent and efficient manner.

There is acceptance that previous counts have not met the expectations of candidates and agents, but there is a desire from both the team and the interim Returning Officer to review processes.

We believe that some relatively straightforward process changes could bring significant improvements in terms of efficiency and the speed results are delivered in.

We think a root and branch review looking at every element of the count afresh will benefit processes. We would also suggest a review of all personnel, making sure that people are given the roles they are most capable of.

Beginning work on plans for 2021 now and, using the combined County Council and Police and Crime Commissioner elections as an opportunity to implement new systems, will put the Council in a good position ahead of district elections in 2023.

We understand such a review requires significant resource, as does the management of the election process. We are concerned by the capacity gap that may now exist due to a proactive Returning Officer leaving. We would urge the current interim, and future Returning Officer, to consider any impact there has been on resources and address any capacity issues that could undermine the implementation of any agreed recommendations.

We feel the time has come for all stakeholders to draw a line under the past and focus on supporting change and approaching the count review with the mindset of a fresh start.

Our other recommendations are primarily ones for consideration and discussion to see whether further improvements could be made to benefit those standing for election in the Cotswolds.

# Recommendations

## Project planning

1. Produce a comprehensive process manual that covers all aspects of the count and brings together existing individual written processes in a consistent form.

2. Produce a detailed count layout plan.

3. Produce a detailed ballot box plan, which details to supervisory staff where boxes brought to them are placed, where boxes being verified are placed and, most importantly, where empty ballot boxes are placed.

4. Consider the merits of next day counting for local government elections.

5. Consider the number of deputies required at the count and their remit.

6. Consider decreasing the number of count assistants by eight and instead using these staff to support supervisors.

7. Review the frequency and length of breaks during the count process.

8. Utilise an individual who is expert in spreadsheets to design a more sophisticated system encompassing all necessary record keeping for the verification and count.

9. Conduct further analysis on the positioning of vans for ballot box drop off and who attends them.

10. Review the verification recount procedure to ensure consistency and efficiency.

11. Ensure clear parameters are set out to make it clear what variance count supervisors are permitted to accept and under what circumstances during the verification.

12. Consider the multi-member count method to be used ahead of the next local government elections, assessing the pros and cons for CDC of each of the options available.

13. Produce a clear and straightforward document showing the path from a count supervisor right through to the RO making the declaration, with clarity on who adjudicates on doubtful papers and within what parameters.

14. Implement a documented recount procedure.

15. Further review who is responsible for moving election materials into storage, the method of storage and the way items are presented, when the documentation is moved, the sign off between the responsible individuals and the process for destruction. Write clear and process notes for all stages.

16. Introduce a detailed review process for all aspects of the count and with a range of staff, candidates and agents to consider their experiences.

17. Implement a performance review process for key staff the RO wishes to retain.

## Staffing and training

18. Conduct a detailed review of all count employees and implement a performance monitoring system.

19. Run a straightforward practical test for all potential count staff prior to offering them a role.

20. Review the wording on count staff appointments to ensure they understand the restrictions placed on them regarding assisting candidates or political parties.

21. Identify, and provide written instructions prior to mandatory training for, all staff responsible for multi member counts.

22. Ensure count assistants arrive by 21:30 and are formally briefed by the RO or DRO.

23. Provide training for all count supervisors.

24. Produce job descriptions for all count roles with a clear chart showing reporting lines and how all count staff sit within the overall structure.

25. Distribute experienced count assistants throughout teams allowing them to support and improve less experienced counters.

26. Consider placing the best count supervisors between other supervisors with less experience or recognised development needs allowing them to act as mentors.

27. Provide further training to POs on the completion of ballot paper accounts.

28. Introduce a process for assessing the standard of count assistants, as well as other count staff, and an improvement plan for those identified as below the required standard.

29. Train count assistants about what should and should not be classed as a doubtful ballot paper.

## Process

30. Consider count supervisors contacting their counting assistants prior to the count to confirm attendance and give any necessary instruction.

31. Consider verifying then immediately counting eight of the wards that are in and around Cirencester before any other wards are verified.

32. Provide clear signage displaying which ballot box or electoral area is being verified or counted at a count table.

33. Create a system of clear record keeping for the reception team at Cirencester, allowing identification of POs who take longer than expected to leave their stations enabling remedial action to be taken.

34. Consider allocating ballot boxes to ensure all count teams can start the verification in a timely fashion.

35. Record ballot paper account discrepancies to identify training needs and discuss them as necessary with the POs.

36. Remind POs in double stations of the importance of keeping ballot boxes from different stations as far apart as possible and review the layout of these stations.

37. Review instructions given to the postal vote team to ensure they understand any priorities.

38. Consider requiring DROs to pre-sort doubtful ballot papers to assist the RO making determinations.

39. Record unused votes for multi member counts.

40. Use labelled archive boxes for storing used and unused ballot papers and seal these at the count.

## Candidates and agents

41. Ensure the structure and process for the count is covered in detail at a briefing for candidates and agents.

42. Provide candidates and agents with a written count plan before the count begins, showing where each polling station will be verified, and each electoral area counted.

43. Ensure clear announcements are made about the adjudication of doubtful ballot papers and the consultation on provisional results.

44. Proactively provide verification statements to candidates and agents, or provide a clear contact who can provide them on request.