

What is Postal Vote Opening and how does it work?

Summary

1. Postal votes are delivered pre-sorted by Royal Mail to the Council offices each day. They are then placed into a ballot box which is sealed until they are ready to be processed.
2. When a postal vote is returned by the voter they include the ballot paper or papers for the election(s) they wish to vote in, and a postal vote statement which includes their signature and date of birth.
3. This matching is done automatically using scanners with manual adjudication where there is no match or information is missing.
4. At each opening session the Returning Officer (or the DRO) will decide whether or not the date of birth and signature provided by electors on their postal voting statements match the signature and date of birth held on their records (supplied as part of the postal vote application process. If there is a mismatch, the postal vote will be rejected. This matching is done automatically using scanners with manual adjudication where there is no match or information is missing.
5. A very small number of voters do not need to sign their postal voting statement. These 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. The postal voting statement sent to such electors will make this clear.
6. A postal voting agent has a right to observe, but not to interfere with this process. A postal voting agent can, however, object to the decision of a Returning Officer to reject a postal vote. It will not affect the Returning Officer's decision, but the Returning Officer will record any objections by marking the postal voting statement with the words 'rejection objected to'.
7. 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. It follows therefore that it will not be possible for them to keep a tally of how ballot papers have been marked. This is also not allowed. In addition, anyone attending a postal vote opening must not attempt to look at identifying marks or numbers on ballot papers, disclose how any particular ballot paper has been marked or 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.
8. Once ballot papers have been determined to be valid they are sorted into the various elections, counted (ballot papers not votes) and placed into ballot boxes by election and sealed at the end of each day to ensure that nobody can access them. These ballot papers will then be included with those from polling stations when votes are counted.

The detailed process:

A postal vote pack contains:

- **Envelope A** is the envelope that the elector returns their ballot paper in. It is marked with the letter 'A' and the words 'ballot paper envelope'
- **Envelope B** 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 Returning Officer
- **The postal voting statement** contains the elector's name, the number of the ballot paper 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**

Verification of postal votes

1. Postal votes are brought to the opening session in sealed ballot boxes.
2. The outer envelopes (envelope B) are taken out and counted.
3. The total number of covering envelopes is recorded.
4. Staff open each covering envelope (envelope B) and remove the postal voting statement (PVS) and the sealed ballot paper envelope (envelope A), keeping them in order.
5. Staff check that the number on the PVS matches the number on the ballot paper (BP) envelope. If any numbers do not match the PVS and the BP envelope are placed back into the covering envelope and placed in a query tray. If either the BP envelope or the PVS arrive without the other part they must also be placed into the query tray (these are called orphans).
6. The Returning Officer must verify the dates of birth and signatures (personal identifiers) provided on the statements which is done by scanning then manual adjudication for mis-matches.
7. The other purpose of scanning is to record the postal votes as received by the Elections Management System (EMS)
8. Any PVS with an incorrect DOB should be rejected immediately – the person scanning marks the PVS as rejected in the EMS, and retrieves the correct BP envelope. The PVS and BP envelope are put together and placed in the tray for provisionally rejected votes. Any PVS with a signature that doesn't match will be also be provisionally rejected.
9. When these are adjudicated by the DRO they are either accepted and placed in the correct ballot box of unopened postal votes to be opened at the next session or finally rejected. There is a process to record the rejected votes and the reason for rejection and as part of the final checks each day supervisors will check to see if they are able to 're-unite' any orphans from different tables.
10. After the elections we write to each elector whose PV was rejected at this verification stage giving the reason for rejection.

Count of postal ballot papers

11. Following verification of the signatures and dates of birth, postal voting statements are removed from the tables.
12. Staff open the BP envelopes and remove the ballot paper.
13. Staff check that the number on the back of the ballot paper matches the number on the BP envelope. Any that do not match or where the correct number of ballot papers have not been returned are placed in the queries tray.
14. Valid ballot papers (not votes) are counted face down the total number is recorded.
15. All valid ballot papers are placed into ballot boxes and stored securely before being delivered to the count.
16. The overall process is very detailed with cumulative verification spreadsheets being completed at the end of each day for each electoral area (21 separate elections).