



# THE ASSOCIATION OF ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATORS

## **Formal response to the consultation on the timing of the counting of votes at the referendum – Management of a referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 This paper sets out the AEA’s views in relation to the questions raised in the above consultation document published in August 2015. This response also links to our response to the consultation on the proposed scope of the Chief Counting Officer’s directions.

### **2. AEA COMMENTS**

**1.13 The CCO intends to direct COs to commence the verification and counting of votes at the referendum as soon as reasonably practicable after the close of poll. For the avoidance of doubt, this would mean that the count processes must be carried out overnight, commencing at the close of poll.**

The AEA does not raise any objections to the proposed direction requiring that the count processes must be carried out overnight, commencing at the close of poll.

This is based on our understanding that the EU referendum will not be combined with any other polls and, as a result, will be a standalone poll.

**The count process – we welcome views on the CCO’s proposal to direct that COs ensure that verification and counting arrangements are structured in such a way as to break down the verification and count into a number of self-contained ‘areas’ smaller than the counting area, with the totals for each of these ‘areas’ aggregated into a single total for the counting area.**

The AEA supports the direction of a ‘mini count’ approach and agrees with the CCO that a ‘mini count’ is an effective method of delivering an accurate and timely local total with a clear audit trail. The AEA recommends the ‘mini count’ approach in its verification and count training courses, and in its Foundation course manual.

However, whilst the 'mini count' approach appears to be a popular method of counting across the country, there may be a few COs who do not count using the 'mini count' approach. COs who have not conducted a 'mini count' for the counting of ballot papers previously will require additional guidance and support. They may also need to consider carrying out a local mock count using the 'mini count' approach to train their senior count staff and supervisors well in advance of the EU referendum.

In addition, those COs will also need to outline the new count processes to local party workers in advance of the EU referendum so that they are aware and understand the 'mini count' process with a view to them having confidence in the conduct of the count and the result. A brief will also need to be provided for the local media.

For those COs who have not counted ballot papers with the 'mini count' approach previously, the training and conduct of the 'mock mini counts' will obviously have additional cost implications in relation to printing, accommodation, training and staffing costs but are essential if the direction requires a change to the usual count processes in those areas.

The CCO may wish to define more clearly or provide further guidance on "a number of self-contained 'areas' smaller than the counting area". For example, some counting areas will have more than one Parliamentary constituency within their counting area which, if counted in Parliamentary constituency areas, could meet the requirement of a number of self-contained 'areas'. We are assuming the CCO means a smaller area, e.g. at ward level or one or more wards put together to create a smaller area. Defining the requirement more clearly would ensure that there is some consistency across the country in relation to the size of 'mini counts'.

**Timing of results – we welcome your views on these factors and on whether there are any other issues that you consider might impact on the timing of local counts, the announcement of local totals and the declaration of the referendum result.**

The consultation paper outlines the following key factors which may impact on the timing of local counts, the announcement of local totals and the declaration of the referendum result:

- voter turnout;
- volume of postal votes handed in at polling stations;
- time taken to transport ballot boxes taking into account geography and weather; and
- recounts

The CCO may also wish to consider the impact of a power failure at a count venue, which happened at the GLA elections in 2012. Whilst COs could put in place contingency arrangements, funding is not provided by the Cabinet Office for such arrangements. It follows therefore that any costs arising from

contingency arrangements would have to be met by the local authority which may well lead to no such arrangements being made. On this basis, we would recommend the CCO to raise this issue with the Cabinet Office.

In addition consideration also needs to be given to fire, security risks including the threat of a terrorist attack and the possibility of disruption from factors outside the control of the CO.

**John Turner**  
**Chief Executive**

September 2015