

Counting of votes at the UK Parliamentary election: statement by (Acting) Returning Officer

Please complete and return this statement to [your](#) local Commission team if you did not start the UK Parliamentary election count within four hours of the close of poll. Please submit the statement within 30 days after the close of poll.

Constituency name:	Orkney and Shetland
Date of election:	4 July 2024
(Acting) Returning Officer's name:	Oliver David Reid
Required information	
Time counting of votes began: (hh/mm)	04:00 (5 July 2024)
Describe the steps you took to start counting the votes before 2.00am:	<p><i>For example in relation to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>verification and count methodology and management arrangements</i> <i>adequacy of staffing resources</i> <i>choice of venue</i> <i>geography and factors affecting the transportation of ballot boxes</i> <i>queues at close of poll</i> <i>number of ballot boxes</i> <i>volume and management of returned postal votes</i> <p><i>Please refer to our guidance on the timing of the verification and count for the types of steps which, as a minimum, should be covered.</i></p>
Explanation of why the counting of the votes did not start by 2.00am:	<p>In the Orkney and Shetland constituency, the unique geographical, weather, transport and logistical challenges play a crucial role in conducting the electoral process. The separation of the two island groups by an expanse of open sea, presents specific difficulties in coordinating and managing the general election voting and counting procedure.</p> <p>Prior to the election it had been determined that the Orkney Election team would undertake the verification of all Orkney votes cast but not begin the count process until after the arrival and verification of</p>

ballot boxes from Shetland. This careful approach was deemed essential for a number of reasons:

Ensuring Accuracy and Integrity: The electoral process mandates strict adherence to accuracy and integrity. By waiting for the ballot boxes from Shetland, the Orkney Election team ensured that all votes within the constituency were verified and accounted for simultaneously. This prevents any discrepancies or accusations of partial counting and maintains the transparency and fairness of the election and count process.

Geographical Considerations: Shetland is separated from Orkney by a considerable distance over the North Sea. Transporting ballot boxes from remote polling stations in Shetland to the central counting location in Orkney involves a complex logistical operation. The furthest ballot boxes on Unst travel 180 miles by land, two ferries and a flight. Factors such as weather conditions and transportation schedules by ferry impact the timely delivery of ballot boxes from across Shetland to a collection location at Sumburgh. An aeroplane was chartered so that the ballot papers could then be transported from Shetland to the Count Centre in Orkney by the quickest method of transport. Notwithstanding this, the Shetland Ballot Boxes can only arrive at the Count Centre around 0300.

Verification Process: Before the actual vote counting begins, it's essential to verify the ballot boxes against polling station paperwork. This verification ensures that all boxes are intact, correctly sealed, and correspond to the records from the polling stations. The Orkney Ballot boxes were verified shortly after the close of poll. However the Shetland Ballot Boxes could only be verified from 0300 onwards with the Orkney Election team thereafter confirming the legitimacy and accuracy of the ballots received from Shetland.

Unified Count Start: Commencing the count only after all ballot boxes have been received ensures a unified and coordinated process. This approach helped manage the resources effectively, streamlined the counting process, and maintained the efficiency of the electoral staff. It also protected the candidates from any observations made at the

	<p>count about voters in Orkney and Shetland voting in different ways as the sorted and counted votes observed on the count tables were a mix of Orkney and Shetland votes.</p> <p>Potential for Weather-Related Delays: Significantly, there was the potential for delays to the count arising from bad weather which would have necessitated suspension of the count and a requirement to ensure that the votes could be held securely for the period of the suspension. Part of the reason for the process adopted was to reduce or eliminate any requirement for abortive work whilst maintaining a robust and transparent process. Had a weather-related suspension been required, the count would have required to be undertaken again from the start if it had already been started. Any alternative approach to the process undertaken would have meant changing the process at the last minute and explaining that to staff, candidates and electoral agents on the night. The approach that was taken minimised any chance for that being required – increasing confidence in the overall process and outcome.</p> <p>By adopting the procedure that was followed, the Orkney Election team demonstrated a commitment to a meticulous and transparent electoral process. This methodical approach helped uphold the democratic values of accuracy, fairness, and integrity, ensuring that every vote within the Orkney and Shetland constituency was accurately counted and recorded. The final declaration of the result was at 6.25am on Friday 5th July. This was in line with other results declared across Scotland and the UK.</p>
Date of this statement:	25 July 2024