



**Councillor
Glyn Griffiths**



**Councillor
Ron Hewett**



**Councillor
Geoff Juby**



**Councillor
Kieran Magee**

FOREWORD

Following the recent general election, this task group was set up by Finance and Performance Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee to see whether there were opportunities for improvement in the election process - and if so how they could be harnessed.

We had the opportunity to discuss the issues with the relevant council officers and a number of candidates' agents from the recent election.

We would like to thank all those who participated for their constructive engagement.

We would wish to record that the election service was generally recognised to be performing well and, in making a number of recommendations, that these will be building on a solid structure.

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INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

1. At its 25 May meeting, the Finance and Performance Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee established an Elections Working Party comprising one member from each of the political groups represented on the committee, to review arrangements for the 5 May Parliamentary election.
2. The scope of the review was:
 - to consider concerns about the treatment of party tellers
 - to consider the length of time taken at the count
3. The committee appointed Councillors Griffiths, Hewett, Juby and Kieran Magee to the review team.
4. The first meeting of the Elections Working Party took place on 2 June, at which time members considered the scope of the review. They discussed whether to widen the remit of the review to include issues around the publication of the electoral register but on balance decided that they would focus attention on the arrangements for tellers and for the count but would not prevent other issues being raised by election agents giving evidence. It was also agreed that the findings of the review should be reported to the Finance and Performance Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee as soon as practicable after the Working Party's final meeting.
5. In deciding how they wished to undertake the review, members considered whether to visit another authority with marginal seats and recounts where the count was completed more quickly than at Medway. However they decided that, given their desire to complete the review in a timely fashion, they would rely on the research undertaken by officers to provide comparative statistics on declaration times, electorates and staffing levels. Members wished to speak to election agents, senior elections officers and the Acting Returning Officer/Electoral Registration Officer (to be referred to as the Acting Returning Officer for the purposes of this report).
6. The election agents from the three main political parties were invited to give evidence to the Working Party. They were asked, in particular, to comment on:
 - the arrangements for tellers
 - the arrangements for the verification and counting of votes
 - any other general issues or concerns regarding any other aspect of the election

Five of the seven attended to give evidence. The other two agents were given the opportunity to submit their comments in writing but chose not to do so.

7. The information that forms the basis of this report was largely gathered through evidence hearings that were conducted between July and September 2005 supplemented by officer research. The full review programme was as follows:-

2 June	Scoping meeting
12 July	Evidence session <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paul Foster, Gillingham and Medway Conservative Party Agent • Fred Bacon, Medway Labour Party Agent • Vince Maple, Chatham & Aylesford Labour Party Agent
21 July	Evidence session <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sue Hannant, Gillingham and Medway Liberal Democrat Party Agent • Linda Miller, Gillingham Labour Party Agent
7 September	Evidence session <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Djula Booth, Elections Co-ordinator • David Howes, Head of Council Office
20 September	Evidence session <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Judith Armitt, Acting Returning Officer Conclusions and finalising the report
6 October	Consideration of report by the Finance and Performance Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee

8. Councillor Griffiths presented this report to the Finance and Performance Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee on behalf of the task group. In so doing he proposed an additional recommendation asking officers to investigate ways in which arrangements for the media at the count centre could be improved. It was generally felt that a parliamentary election afforded Medway an opportunity to ensure it gained national media attention and therefore a review of the arrangements for the media was merited.

Recommendation

Officers investigate ways in which arrangements for the media at the count centre could be improved.

TELLERS

9. The Working Party was of the opinion that there was a perception that the arrangements for tellers at the parliamentary election were poor and members were keen to test this.
10. They did this by seeking the views of all councillors and by asking election agents for their comments.
11. A letter was sent to every Medway councillor seeking comments on their experience of the arrangements for tellers, asking in particular about specific problems at specific locations so that these could be followed up, and also any general observations that they might wish to make.
12. Four of the 55 councillors responded. Three of the respondents expressed concern at the lack of shelter from the elements for tellers, (in one particular instance because a different entrance was used from previous elections) and one was concerned that tellers were directed to sit in a particular place that made it difficult for them to speak to all voters as they left the polling station.
13. Election agents were advised in advance of the sessions they attended that they would be asked for their comments on this matter.
14. The notes of the agents' meeting with the Acting Returning Officer reflected the comments made by election agents that they had been advised that tellers had no status in law but were widely tolerated and that presiding officers were advised that they should assist tellers where possible. Agents were also advised that tellers could not enter the polling station and that although access to a covered area would be made available where possible, this could not be guaranteed. Agents were therefore strongly encouraged to take care when appointing tellers as, if the weather was bad, they would not be allowed to take shelter in the polling station however vulnerable the teller might appear to be.
15. Three of the five election agents who gave evidence did not consider arrangements for tellers to be a major issue. They had all asked for feedback, both negative and positive, and had received none, which suggested to them that there were no significant problems. All noted that the weather had not been particularly bad and the response may have been different had there been particularly adverse weather conditions.
16. Both of the remaining agents were particularly concerned about this issue. One felt that the attitude within the council was anti telling which in his opinion did not encourage the democratic process. Both referred to the apparent inconsistent approach between polling stations and cited polling stations where the presiding officer was good and others

where the presiding officer was rude or unhelpful. It was accepted however that some presiding officers could be seen to be too lax.

17. All agents recognised that tellers could not be in a position to influence or see how votes were cast. However, those that expressed an opinion, felt that where a room was large enough, an area could be screened off for tellers without compromising the integrity of the process.
18. The Head of Council Office noted agents' concerns regarding polling stations without anterooms to provide cover but advised that it was impossible to identify ideal polling stations and the over-riding factor in determining their location was ease of access to voters.
19. The Acting Returning Officer recognised that this was a very difficult area. She was always sorely conscious of the fact that if the weather was bad it seemed both harsh and unreasonable to expect tellers to be out in the cold and wet, particularly given that the average age of tellers appeared to be increasing. However two significant factors had to be weighed against this and they were:
 - (i) By law tellers cannot be in the polling station.
 - (ii) It can be genuinely intimidating for the voter if the teller is the first person they meet in the polling station. This factor alone would be enough to make the Acting Returning Officer hesitate to support a sectioned off area for tellers.
20. The Acting Returning Officer explained that the ideal situation would be for every polling station to have an anteroom or cover of some sort but that this was just not possible given the lack of suitable buildings.
21. The Working Party was advised of concerns regarding the advice given to presiding officers in respect of poll cards. One agent believed that they appeared to have been instructed to ask people to throw them away in the polling station since the majority of people did not have their cards when they came out. He suggested that bins could have been placed outside the polling station for people to dispose of their cards. At least one other agent had experienced similar difficulties. The Head of Council Office advised that presiding officers had not been instructed to ask people to throw away their cards in the polling stations. As this issue had been raised in the agents' meeting, presiding officers had been advised at training sessions to provide bins both inside and outside the polling room, and to remind voters that tellers may wish to see their poll card on exit. However they could not and should not suggest to voters that they were under any obligation to retain their card.
22. It was recognised that the lack of legal status for tellers was not something the Acting Returning Officer could do anything about. One agent felt that political parties needed to work more closely with the Electoral Commission to ensure that tellers became part of the democratic process and thereby had an existence in law.

23. Most agents raised the issue of rosettes and the advice that had been given by the Acting Returning Officer. They questioned why it was acceptable to display a party logo but not the name of the party itself as on the face of it this did not make sense.
24. There was also a suggestion that the information supplied to presiding officers on tellers was slightly different from that given to agents. The Working Party reviewed the information set out in all the documentation issued by the Electoral Commission and the Elections Team and concluded that it was not inconsistent.
25. The Working Party felt that the key issues were the instructions given to presiding officers and their interpretation of them. They noted that all presiding officers had attended a training session where it had been emphasised that they should do what they reasonably could to accommodate tellers. Presiding officers were constantly pressured to allow access to the polling room itself but the legislation very clearly spelt out who was entitled to enter the polling station and a teller was not one of them.
26. Members recognised that this had not been a significant issue for all those canvassed and that there was a danger that the convenience of voters could be sacrificed for that of tellers. They also noted that there was a considerable body of advice for agents regarding tellers. Members accepted that most of the issues that agents had highlighted to the Working Party could have been dealt with on the day if the Election Team had been informed. Members recognised that just as there were presiding officers who do not follow the rules there are also tellers who can be difficult. They were therefore pleased to note that there had been only one complaint regarding the behaviour of tellers whereas there had been several at each of the previous elections.

Recommendations

- (a) Officers compile a list of polling stations where there is no anteroom or cover for tellers.**
- (b) Where there is one large room consideration is given to the possibility of using waffle boards to section off part of the room for tellers, where this would not intimidate voters.**
- (c) Officers give clearer advice to political parties regarding the acceptability of rosettes worn by tellers.**

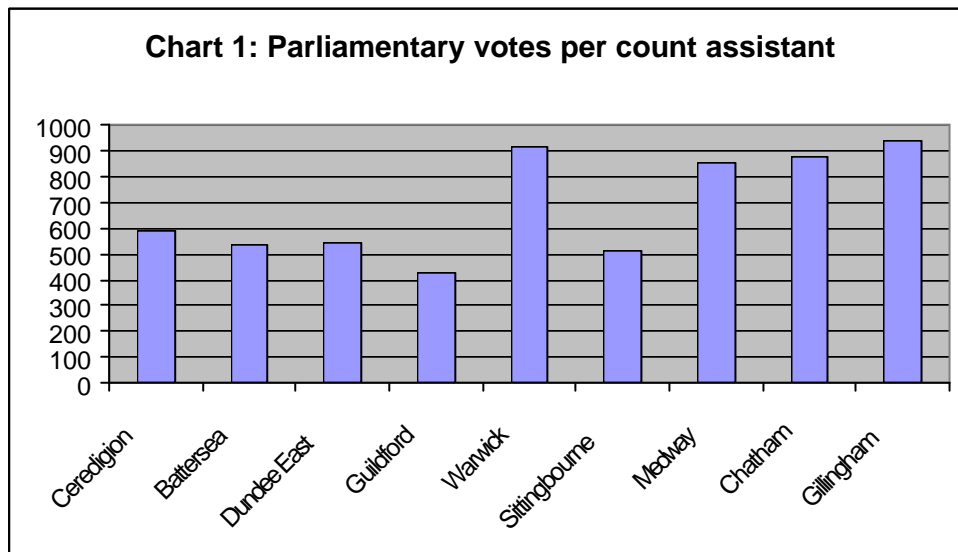
THE COUNT

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

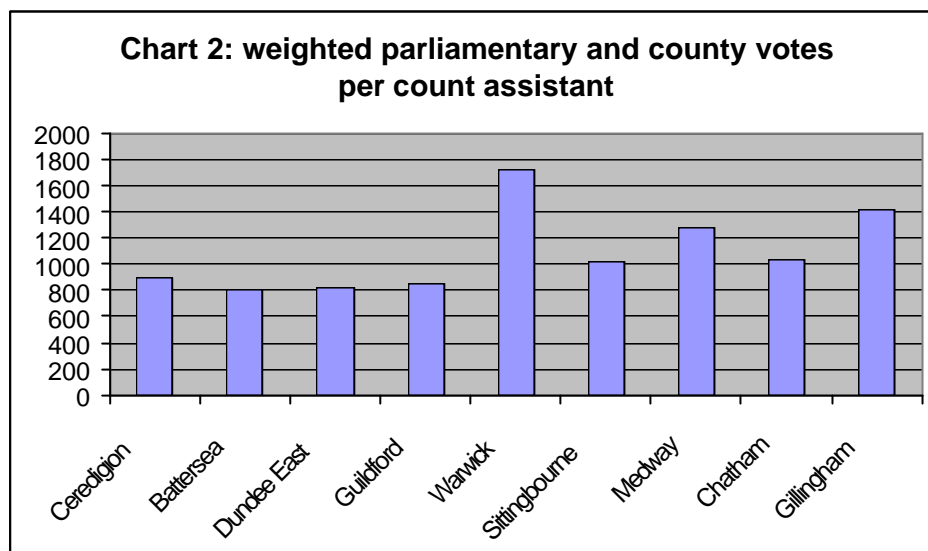
27. In the light of the general concern that the count took too long the Working Party wanted to consider statistics comparing Medway's performance against other authorities and against its own performance at the previous parliamentary election.

Comparative Statistics

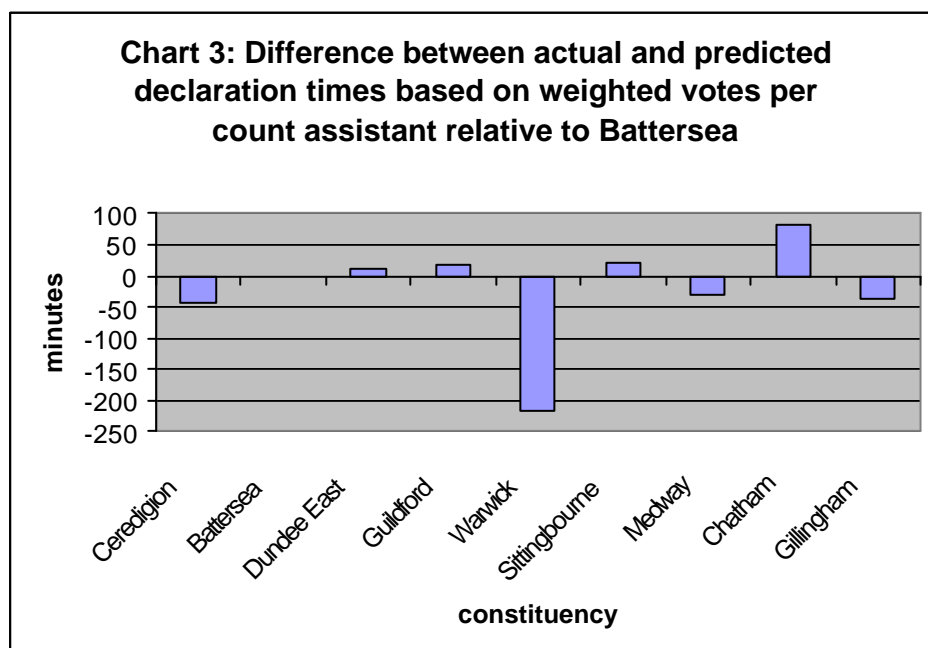
28. The 2005 declaration times for all UK parliamentary constituencies were recorded from the BBC website and entered on a spreadsheet. Constituencies with majorities of less than 400 were identified and the Acting Returning Officer in each case was contacted. In all cases they confirmed that some kind of recount (from bundle check to full recount) had been undertaken. They also provided details of the number of count assistants employed for the marginal constituency involved, and indicated the number of constituencies handled at their count venue.
29. Analysis is presented in the four charts below. Chart 1 shows the number of parliamentary votes cast per count assistant employed on that constituency.



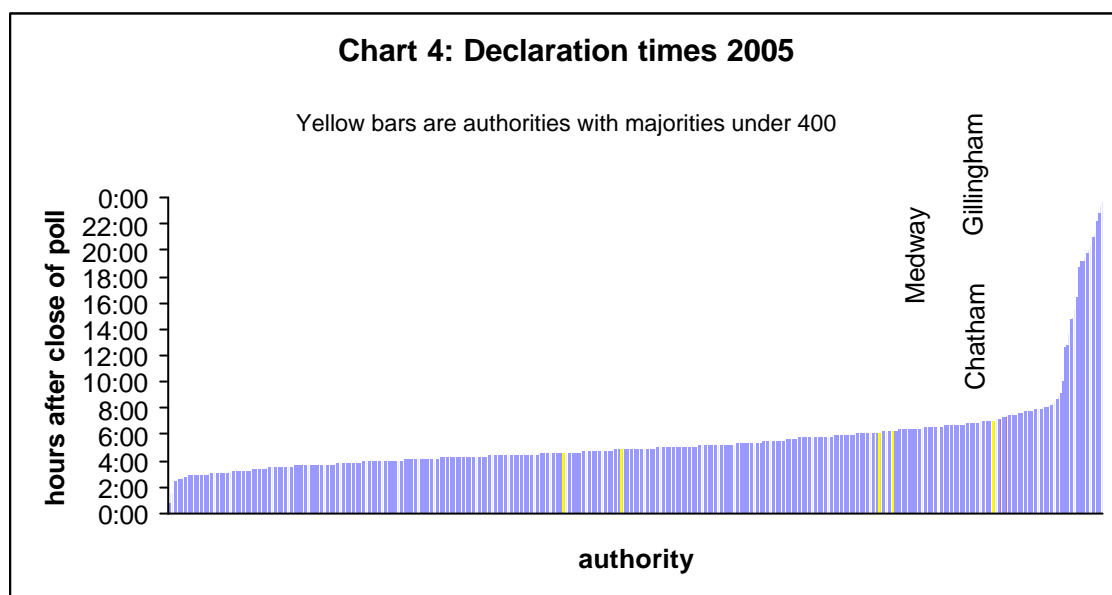
30. Some constituencies held county council as well as parliamentary elections. For chart 2 the number of county votes cast was weighted by a factor of 0.5 to reflect the fact that these votes were only verified on the night of 5 May and were counted on the morning of 6 May. The number of parliamentary votes cast was weighted by 1.5 to reflect recounts where they occurred, that is everywhere except Chatham and Aylesford. The resulting weighted number of votes was divided by the number of count assistants to yield the weighted votes per count assistant shown in the chart.



31. The weighted number of votes per count assistant for Battersea, and the time taken to declare the Battersea result, were taken as benchmarks against which expected times for declaration could be modelled for the other constituencies. For example, if the weighted number of votes per count assistant were twice as high as Battersea, one would expect the result to take twice as long to declare.



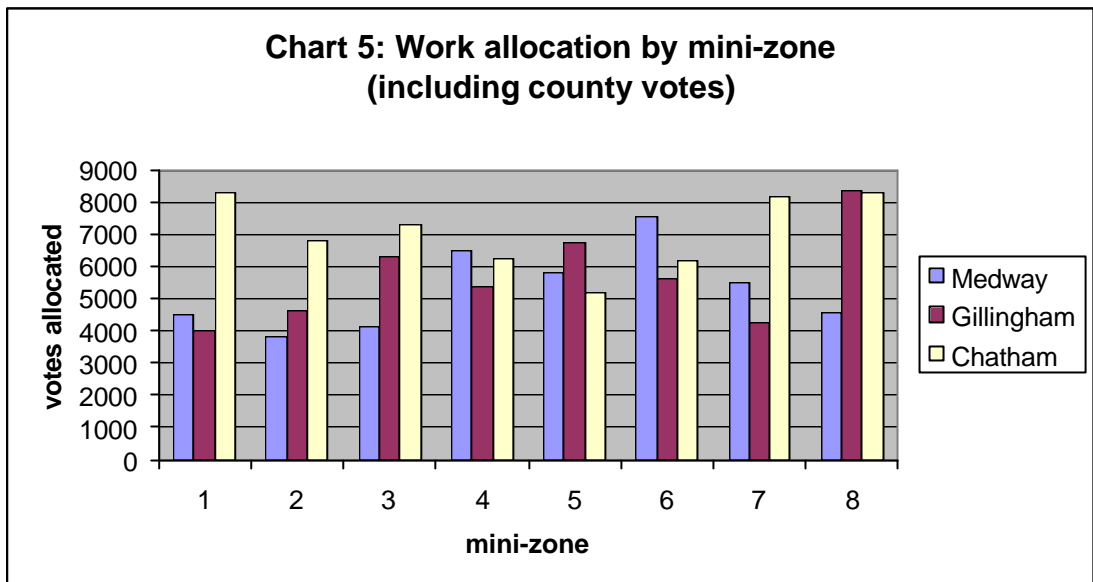
32. The Working Party noted that these figures show that Medway and Gillingham performed slightly better than Battersea pro-rata, but Chatham and Aylesford declared about 90 minutes later than expected, even allowing for county votes and the staffing level. Warwick would appear to be something of an anomaly.



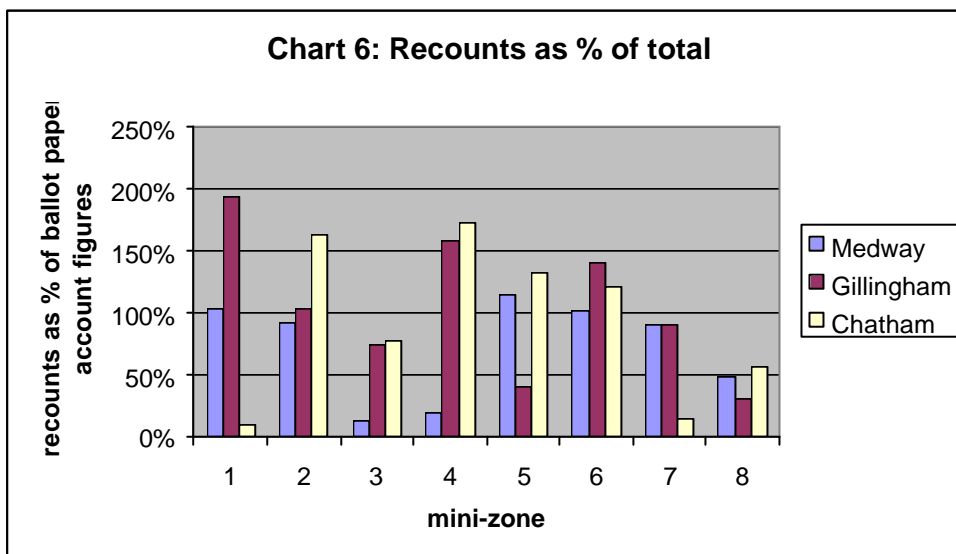
33. Chart 4 shows the declaration times of each UK parliamentary constituency, with the marginal seats selected for detailed analysis shown in yellow and the Medway constituencies shown in red.

Statistics about Medway's Counts

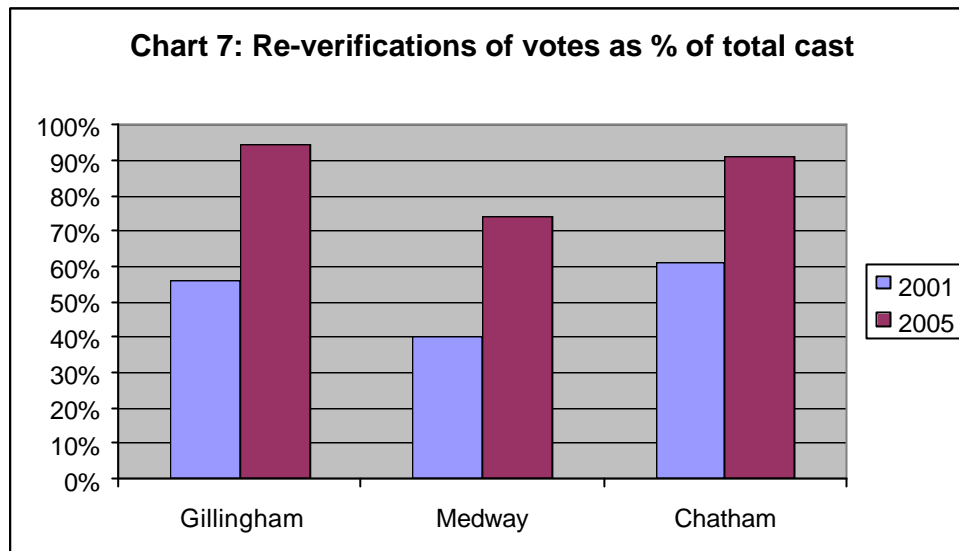
34. At the Working Party's request tally cards comparing ballot paper accounts with numbers of votes counted by assistants were analysed. The same analysis was performed for tally cards from the 2001 election. The results of the analysis are presented in three further charts.
35. Chart 5 looks at the extent to which it proved possible to equalise the workload allocated to each mini-zone in terms of votes. However, members noted that some of the imbalances may have been due to deliberate allocation of more work to the quickest mini-zones.



36. Chart 6 shows the extent to which recounts were required in each mini-zone at verification stage (i.e. to check against the ballot paper account figure provided by the presiding officer at the polling station). It measures a combination of the ballot paper account and the accuracy of the counting teams.



37. It was clear to members that some teams managed to match the ballot paper account figure on many occasions (for example Chatham and Aylesford mini-zone 1, Medway mini-zone 3). Others such as Gillingham mini-zone 1 counted each vote an average of three times at verification stage.



38. Chart 7 shows re-verifications as a proportion of total votes cast. If 50,000 people voted in a constituency, ten boxes of 2,000 were reconciled on first verification, ten boxes of 2,000 votes had to be verified twice and five boxes of 2,000 votes had to be verified three times, the total number of re-verifications would have been 40,000 or 80% of votes cast. The figures show the extent to which re-verification levels increased between 2001 and 2005.
39. The Working Party accepted that this, coupled with lower staffing levels, contributed to the length of time taken to arrive at a declaration.

THE COUNT PROCESS

40. A different procedure was adopted for this election compared to the 2001 election. The over-riding aim of this was to improve accuracy although it was also anticipated that it would speed up the count, as the Acting Returning Officer had detected beforehand a huge delay moving from verification to the count. The Acting Returning Officer was satisfied that the process for dealing with the arrival of ballot boxes was as efficient as it could be but believed there was more scope for improving the movement of ballot boxes within the main zone itself.
41. Each of the three main zones was divided into eight mini-zones of three tables each with six count assistants and one count supervisor to each mini-zone.
42. A number of ballot boxes were allocated to each mini-zone on the basis of time of arrival and number of papers in them to equalise workload. The count process consisted of two stages:

- (i) Verification – the ballot papers in each box were counted to ensure that the number tallied with the figure on the ballot paper account. There was no discrepancy accepted between ballot paper account and verified figure without requiring re-verification.
 - (ii) Sorting and counting – at different points in the evening each mini-zone stopped verifying and moved on to sorting and counting votes for each candidate. This was a change from the previous procedure where counting did not begin until all ballot boxes for a main zone had been verified.
43. Agents were critical of the fact that the process had not been explained to them beforehand and therefore it took them a while to understand what was going on, even though there had been a verbal briefing on arrangements at the agents' meeting and notes had been distributed on count arrangements to all election agents, candidates and counting agents. On balance the Working Party felt that the agents' criticism that the count was poorly organised, too slow and the mini-zone procedure did not work was due in part to the lack of information provided about the process and the reasons for adopting this approach.
44. There were a number of other issues that the election agents raised that were not directly attributable to the mini-zone approach:
- The lack of the use of 'shoe boxes' for sorting weakened the perception of transparency and it was very difficult for counting agents to follow what was happening and therefore to challenge where a ballot paper was placed.
 - At verification political parties were particularly interested in certain ballot boxes, however it proved impossible to target them as information on which box was being verified was not available. Previously lists of ballot boxes allocated to polling stations and where they would be verified had been provided so that it had been possible to target certain boxes.
 - The lack of the use of a ladder/thermometer (visible vertical markers) meant it was impossible to tell how the count was progressing. It was suggested that this might also have contributed to the call for recounts in two of the constituencies where the result looked to be the opposite to that declared because some mini-zone supervisors were packing the bundles of votes into crates more tightly than others.
 - Counting assistants appeared to be unclear whether they were counting in bundles of 25 or 50.
 - Challenges at the count were ignored until election agents or candidates became involved.
 - Coloured voting slips ran out which caused confusion as different coloured slips were used during the recounts.
45. The Acting Returning Officer recognised that concerns about the number of staff, their degree of counting skills and difficulties recruiting

were all valid but that in her own view perhaps the biggest mistake was looking for accuracy over speed in that no discrepancy was allowed between ballot paper account and verified figure without requiring re-verification.

46. Members noted that most returning officers accepted a greater level of inaccuracy but all members agreed that they would not wish to compromise accuracy for speed and preferred to look at other factors that may have contributed to the speed of the count.
47. The Working Party considered the arrangements for the count in the Chatham and Aylesford zone given the length of time it had taken to complete. They noted that some ballot boxes contained papers for both the county council and parliamentary elections that needed to be verified separately to the figures on the ballot paper account.
48. The Acting Returning Officer advised that the only reason for not having a separate box for the county papers was at the insistence of the Acting Returning Officer at Tonbridge and Malling, to avoid the situation where a ballot paper is put into the wrong box and will therefore go to the wrong count. Members were of the opinion that this could be overcome with having runners at each venue, and that the benefit of not needing to verify the county papers would outweigh any inconvenience this caused.
49. The Working Party made a number of recommendations for improvements.

Recommendations

- (a) Reduce the number of mini-zones to four per main zone thereby freeing up space to accommodate more counters.**
- (b) Ensure that ballot boxes from double stations are always counted in the same mini-zone, one immediately after the other so that balancing discrepancies for each station can be quickly identified without the need for re-verification counts.**
- (c) Ensure that count supervisors are aware of the origin of the box being verified and are briefed to advise counting agents of this.**
- (d) Once a mini-zone count is completed pool all counted bundles in central boxes clearly marked for each candidate.**
- (e) Ensure that visible vertical markers (ladders) are placed between every group of ten bundles (250 votes) to assist counting agents in assessing the number of votes cast for candidates.**
- (f) The possibility of separate ballot boxes for the county elections is strenuously explored by the Acting Returning Officer with the Acting Returning Officer at Tonbridge and Malling.**

SPOILT PAPERS

50. The majority of election agents were critical of the arrangements for adjudicating spoilt ballot papers. They felt that the mini-zone system resulted in a very drawn out adjudication process. One election agent likened it to being part of a rugby scrum as there were too many people crowded round the Acting Returning Officer. Members agreed that it would be preferable to have one table for the adjudication of spoilt papers.
51. Members noted that a balance needed to be struck between keeping track of where the ballot paper came from, against making it easy for agents to gather.
52. In response to concerns that there seemed to be an increase in the number of spoilt papers for adjudication, particularly where there were ticks instead of crosses members considered whether the advice to zone controllers regarding what should be accepted as a valid vote was robust. They were satisfied that it was and that count supervisors were reacting to challenges from counting agents.

Recommendations

- (a) A specific area within the count hall is made available for the Acting Returning Officer to adjudicate on spoilt papers.**
- (b) Announcements are made before each adjudication.**

RECOUNTS

53. There was a perception that the Acting Returning Officer had resisted having a recount. Members sought to explore whether this was the case and if so whether it was a reflection of the certainty officers had regarding the benefits of the mini-zone system. They were satisfied that all interested parties were afforded the opportunity to request a recount.
54. Members also reviewed the recount process itself and were satisfied that complete recounts had taken place.

No further action is recommended.

STAFFING

55. Members were advised that at the time that the layout for the count hall had to be finalised, significant difficulties were being experienced appointing count assistants. This factor combined with the additional floor space needed to accommodate eight mini-zones in each main zone resulted in the appointment of 144 count assistants compared to 172 at the 2001 parliamentary election.
56. The speed at which the count is conducted will depend largely on the skills of the count supervisors in sharing out the work and keeping all count assistants busy. Both agents and officers expressed concerns at the varied ability of count assistants which appeared to be borne out by the statistics provided at paragraphs 33-38 above. Members suggested that work could be undertaken throughout the forthcoming year to recruit, test and train adequate numbers of staff in advance of the local election, for which the date was already known. They suggested approaching universities with a view to recruiting from the student body. The same group could also be used for any pilot work on improvements to the register.
57. Written instructions were provided for all count staff but training was only provided for count supervisors, control clerks and zone controllers. Members recognised that the instructions for count assistants were clear and comprehensive, however they felt that there would be merit in briefing all count assistants before the count began, reminding them of the main things they needed to know.

Recommendations

- (a) Recruitment to take place throughout the year including testing and the provision of training.**
- (b) Count assistants to be required to arrive at the count hall earlier to allow them all to be briefed together on the main things they need to know.**

VENUE AND LAYOUT

58. The counting of votes for the parliamentary election took place at the Black Lion Leisure Centre, Gillingham. The ballot boxes were delivered to the Jumpers Rebound Centre and from there were taken through to the Leisure Centre's main hall. A second hall, known as the large practice hall, was used for the storage of all other documentation from polling stations and the empty ballot boxes. There was a separate zone for each constituency count.

59. It was generally agreed that the counts for all three constituencies should be run at the same venue and this being the case, the Black Lion Leisure Centre represented the best venue in Medway.
60. The Working Party's attention was drawn to the unsatisfactory arrangements for disabled access to the count centre. They were advised that there were turnstiles on the main door, which made this entrance unsuitable for wheelchair users and those on crutches, however there was nobody available to open the disabled entrance. Once this obstacle was overcome there was another as there was no one readily available who knew how to operate the platform lift to the count hall itself. This issue was only resolved by the intervention of the Acting Returning Officer. This was of particular concern as the matter had been raised at the agents' meeting.
61. There was a general request for improved signage in the count hall. Election agents did not feel that they had a grip on what was going on and where.
62. At one of the evidence sessions a suggestion was made that there was too much space on the right hand side of the hall and at least two more tables could be accommodated for each zone. This view was not generally held, with most agents acknowledging that the layout worked well and that there appeared to be adequate staff although many appeared to be idle at various points during the evening.

Recommendation

An individual is designated with responsibility for ensuring disabled access at the count venue on election night.

OTHER ISSUES RAISED BY ELECTION AGENTS

ACCESS TO SHELTERED ACCOMMODATION

63. The issue of access by campaigners to council run sheltered accommodation was raised. There seemed to be an inconsistent approach adopted by wardens to requests to enter the accommodation. Members felt that if there was a preferred view it would make sense for it to be expressed to wardens but noted that although this could also be made clear to other providers they would be less bound by it.
64. Members also recognised that there was an issue regarding who should be allowed admittance and were keen to balance the democratic rights of residents with the need to offer protection to a vulnerable section of society.

Recommendation

Action is taken to ensure that a consistent approach is adopted by wardens regarding access by campaigners into council run properties.

AGENTS' BRIEFING

65. Agents generally appreciated the opportunity to attend a meeting with the Acting Returning Officer and key election staff. In general the election agents felt that the briefing process for agents was well managed. They had been advised at the outset that two key election officers had left the council and another team member was absent on long term sick leave. They felt that in spite of the pressure the team was under everyone had been helpful and friendly. Calls were always returned promptly and the information flow was good.
66. A number of agents were keen to state that the service provided by the staff and their helpful and friendly attitude was much appreciated.

No further action is recommended.

ELECTORAL REGISTER

Accuracy of the register

67. One of the agents was particularly concerned about the accuracy of the register. The Working Party was advised that a number of people insisted they should be on the register but were not, whilst in some

instances the names of deceased had not been removed, causing unnecessary distress to relatives when poll cards were delivered.

68. Members were advised that the Elections Office received notification of deaths within Medway, however if there was an inquest this notification would not take place until after Coroner's Court, which could result in a significant delay. In addition no notification was given when the death of a Medway resident occurred outside the borough, for example in a hospice or hospital elsewhere in the country. Further research showed that this had been the case in at least two of the instances where concern had been expressed.
69. Members queried whether there were any arrangements in place with Council Tax to share information about deaths and other movements in and out of Medway. They were advised that the Elections Office sent copies of the weekly deceased list received from the Registrars to Council Tax. There was no similar exchange of names of the deceased but when someone moved into Medway they were sent a leaflet and form regarding electoral registration with their council tax information.
70. The Working Party noted that officers were also considering approaching local estate agents to include rolling registration forms in their packs. They also noted the potential to make links through use of the council's customer contact centre.
71. Those agents that commented on this issue preferred the previous practice of employing door to door canvassers. The Working Party was advised that there would be cost implications of employing canvassers, their recruitment and management. The response from using Royal Mail was relatively high at 87%. Officers were considering doing something other than simply sending another reminder next year. The difficulty was that the targeted non-responding properties became more geographically dispersed. Members noted the sensitivities around a concentrated canvass in a particular area but felt that there would be merit in running a pilot in a couple of areas to see if this offered an improved result in the context of value for money. It was also noted that to run the pilots next year was sensitive given the impending local election, although members felt this should not be a basis for doing nothing. They were concerned however that this was an evening activity and the health and safety issues this raised.
72. Members were advised that another option would be to consider having an on-going canvass. The requirement to undertake an annual audit would remain. This could mean that door-knocking only took place when evenings were lighter.
73. Whilst members were keen for action to be taken to improve the register they accepted the view of the Acting Returning Officer that there were several kinds of gaps in the register that lent themselves to different approaches. For example black people tended to be under-

represented and the current approaches to encouraging registration for this group were not effective enough. Similarly door-knocking was unlikely to reach young people. The Working Party considered a range of approaches to address this issue.

Recommendations

- (a) Officers investigate whether greater integration with other council software can be achieved to improve the accuracy of the electoral registration data.**
- (b) Inquiries are made to identify what advice is given to relatives of the deceased by Bereavement Services in respect of electoral deregistration.**
- (c) Consideration is given to implementing on-going canvass arrangements i.e. an annual audit and a rolling target.**
- (d) Consideration is given to a range of activities to encourage registration in time for any budget requirements to be fed into the budget process, including, but not exclusively, the following:**
 - piloting a scheme in a couple of areas to re-introduce 'door-knocking' for the final stage of the canvass;**
 - working with ethnic minority groups for example through the Ethnic Minority Forum and local faith leaders;**
 - working with schools and colleges through citizen activity programmes, the Youth Outreach Team, the new Children's Services, Universities and Youth Parliament;**
 - continuing to prosecute for non-completion of the registration form.**

Availability of the register

74. One of the agents was concerned that copies of the register were not available until quite late in the process and this, combined with the fact that the availability of registers was more restricted, meant they were unable to help constituents with queries about their inclusion or otherwise on the register.
75. Members were advised that candidates were each entitled to receive a register but only at the point at which they became a prospective candidate. Copies of the register were available for collection at the agents' meeting. It is possible however that they announce their prospective candidature several months before the election and therefore any register supplied at that point will not necessarily include all those who would be eligible to vote in the election when it is called. This is because the last monthly rolling registration process before the election is often close to the close of nomination process so that it makes sense to wait until those additions, removals and changes have

been made so that candidates and agents have the latest version of what will be used for the election.

No further action is recommended.

NOMINATIONS

76. It was generally agreed that the nomination process was satisfactory, however agents would have welcomed being advised at the agents' meeting that they would need to make an appointment with the Deputy Acting Returning Officer to submit the papers. This had caused difficulties on at least two occasions. Officers agreed that this requirement could be made explicit at the agents' meeting in future.
77. Two agents raised concerns about the nomination process. One agent was concerned at the advice given in respect of signatures on nomination papers and drew the Working Party's attention to the fact that some assentors (this is the technical term for the people whose details have to be given on the nomination paper in support of the candidate) had not signed the documentation as their names appeared on the register. He also advised that one of the candidates had had to have the nomination form completed again because the electoral numbers had been transposed. Members were advised that the normal signature was acceptable. Unfortunately there seemed to be confusion when other members gave their colleagues conflicting advice.
78. Most agents expressed a desire to have copies of the nomination forms at an earlier stage. The Working Party was advised that there was a danger in providing the nomination forms too early as there could be statutory changes up to the deadline for completion and therefore out of date forms could be submitted without time to complete the correct ones and thereby failing to secure a candidacy.

Recommendation

Consideration is given to providing candidates and agents with a single sheet highlighting how to complete the forms including how the signature should appear, who can submit the forms and how.

POLL CARDS

79. One of the agents was of the opinion that poll cards were crammed with too much information and required redesigning. He welcomed the inclusion of maps identifying the location of the polling station on poll cards but did not wish to see the postal vote application form included.
80. The Working Party considered examples of poll cards from the parliamentary, European and local elections and noted that the poll cards for the recent parliamentary election had already been simplified and the font enlarged. They also noted that the postal vote application form was no longer included on the poll card although the deadlines for postal and proxy applications were printed.

No further action is recommended.

POLLING STATIONS

Double Stations

81. Concern was raised regarding the use of double stations and the confusion it caused to voters who were not clear where they were going. It was suggested that signage could be improved but also that separate entrances should be used for each polling station. Members were pleased to note the Acting Returning Officer's long term objective of ceasing to have double polling stations.

No further action is recommended.

Disabled access and signage

82. A number of issues were raised regarding disabled or difficult access and signage. Problems at the following venues in particular were highlighted:
- Temple Farm Working Men's Club
 - Sunlight Centre
 - Carpeaux Close Community Centre
 - United Reform Church, Balmoral Road
 - Skinner Street School

Recommendations

- (a) Officers look at the specific issues raised regarding disabled access and signage.**
- (b) Officers identify those polling stations where additional signage is required and include them in the ballot box where appropriate.**
- (c) The resource available is gradually increased as problems are identified.**

POSTAL VOTES

83. It was generally agreed that the arrangements for postal vote issue and opening were very good, although it was suggested that in future there should be additional envelope slitting machines.
84. There was a general perception that there had been a high level of rejected postal votes, which was not borne out by the figures. These showed that approximately 2% of the number received were rejected. Members were satisfied that they were only rejected for serious errors such as failure to have the declaration witnessed.

No further action is recommended.

RECORD OF VOTES CAST

85. An issue was raised regarding whether information could be provided by presiding officers throughout the day on the number of votes cast. The Working Party queried whether this information was collected by presiding officers and if so, whether they could lawfully provide it to candidates or agents on request.

Recommendation

Officers investigate whether it is lawful for this information to be provided and if so, whether it will be made available in future.

TICKETS FOR THE COUNT

86. An agent drew attention to the fact that the tickets for the count were not available until election day and asked whether they could be distributed at an earlier stage as they had to be collected and distributed by the election agents at one of their busiest times.

Members noted that the statutory deadline for the appointment of counting agents was very close to the date of the election and it was therefore very difficult to have the tickets and any other information regarding the arrangements for the count ready any earlier .

No further action is recommended.

CONCLUSIONS

87. The Working Party noted that, as two key posts were vacant at the time of the election, it was delivered on a thin knowledge and resource base and that the time available for preparation was limited. This fact notwithstanding they were pleased to note the general appreciation from all contributors of the way the staff involved responded to their requests and delivered the service.
88. There had been a wide degree of consensus about areas of concern that focussed particularly on the arrangements for tellers and the length of the count, the latter being primarily the driver for the review.
89. Members concluded that there was no systemic problem with the approach of presiding officers nor was there any evidence of an anti-telling attitude on behalf of the Acting Returning Officer. Tellers were accepted as a very well established part of election custom and practice, who would be accommodated wherever possible.
90. The Working Party examined the contention that the mini-zone process was an effective way of validating votes cast and made the count more speedy. They agreed that it was difficult to pin down exactly which problems had contributed to the delay on election night. Their initial presumption had been against the mini-zone approach but the further the review progressed they became more disposed towards it. Members were not persuaded that this approach speeded up the count per se but accepted that the accuracy that the process delivered outweighed to some degree the amount of time the count took. The Working Party was of the opinion that a reduction in the number of mini-zones could maintain accuracy whilst increasing efficiency.
91. There was clearly an issue regarding the difficulties recruiting polling station staff and counting staff with the right skills that almost certainly contributed to the problems on election night.
92. In formulating their recommendations the members of the Working Party recognised that there would be some budgetary implications but in commending them for action they anticipated that those that had member support could be considered as part of the budget setting process.

REVIEW FINDINGS

93. In the light of all the information presented, Cabinet is requested to endorse the recommendations set out below to the Acting Returning Officer/Electoral Registration Officer with the exception of (a), (o), (p), (q) and (y) where Cabinet is requested to instruct relevant officers.

Tellers:

- (a) Officers compile a list of polling stations where there is no anteroom or cover for tellers.
- (b) Where there is one large room consideration is given to the possibility of using waffle boards to section off part of the room for tellers, where this would not intimidate voters.
- (c) Officers give clearer advice to political parties regarding the acceptability of rosettes worn by tellers.

The count:

- (d) Reduce the number of mini-zones to four per main zone thereby freeing up space to accommodate more counters.
- (e) Ensure that ballot boxes from double stations are always counted in the same mini-zone, one immediately after the other so that balancing discrepancies for each station can be quickly identified without the need for re-verification counts.
- (f) Ensure that count supervisors are aware of the origin of the box being verified and are briefed to advise counting agents of this.
- (g) Once a mini-zone count is completed pool all counted bundles in central boxes clearly marked for each candidate.
- (h) Ensure that visible vertical markers (ladders) are placed between every group of ten bundles (250 votes) to assist counting agents in assessing the number of votes cast for candidates.
- (i) The Acting Returning Officer strenuously explores the possibility of separate ballot boxes for the county elections with the Acting Returning Officer at Tonbridge and Malling.

Spoilt papers:

- (j) A specific area within the count hall is made available for the Acting Returning Officer to adjudicate on spoilt papers.
- (k) Announcements are made before each adjudication.

Staffing:

- (l) Recruitment to take place throughout the year including testing and the provision of training.
- (m) Count assistants to be required to arrive at the count hall earlier to allow them all to be briefed together on the main things they need to know.

Venue and layout:

- (n) An individual is designated with responsibility for ensuring disabled access at the count venue on election night.

Access to sheltered accommodation:

- (o) Action is taken to ensure that a consistent approach is adopted by wardens regarding access by campaigners into council run properties.

Electoral register:

- (p) Officers investigate whether greater integration with other council software can be achieved to improve the accuracy of the electoral registration data.
- (q) Inquiries are made to identify what advice is given to relatives of the deceased by Bereavement Services in respect of electoral deregistration.
- (r) Consideration is given to implementing on-going canvass arrangements i.e. an annual audit and a rolling target.
- (s) Consideration is given to a range of activities to encourage registration in time for any budget requirements to be fed into the budget process, including, but not exclusively, the following:
- piloting a scheme in a couple of areas to re-introduce 'door-knocking' for the final stage of the canvass;
 - working with ethnic minority groups for example through the Ethnic Minority Forum and local faith leaders;
 - working with schools and colleges through citizen activity programmes, the Youth Outreach Team, the new Children's Services, Universities and Youth Parliament;
 - continuing to prosecute for non-completion of the registration form.

Nominations:

- (t) Consideration is given to providing candidates and agents with a single sheet highlighting how to complete the forms including how the signature should appear, who can submit the forms and how.

Disabled access and signage at polling stations:

- (u) Officers look at the specific issues raised regarding disabled access and signage.
- (v) Officers identify those polling stations where additional signage is required and include them in the ballot box where appropriate.
- (w) The resource available is gradually increased as problems are identified.

Record of votes cast:

- (x) Officers investigate whether it is lawful for this information to be provided and if so, whether it will be made available in future.

Media:

- (y) Officers investigate ways in which arrangements for the media at the count centre could be improved.

94. There are a number of areas where the Working Party carefully considered the issue raised but have decided on balance not to make any recommendations for further action. These areas are:

- recounts
- agents' briefing
- availability of the register
- poll cards
- double polling stations
- postal votes
- tickets for the count

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

POLL CARDS

- Examples of poll cards from:
 - 2005 Parliamentary Election
 - 2004 European Election
 - 2003 Local Election
- Extract from the Electoral Commission good practice manual: 'Managing a UK Parliamentary general election' (2005) on which the format of the 2005 poll card was based.
- Extract from Representation of the People Regulations 2001 that sets out the legal position.

POSTAL VOTES

- Instructions to the voter

INFORMATION FOR CANDIDATES AND AGENTS

- Letter accompanying package of guidance and exemplar forms
- The Electoral Commission guidance for candidates and agents
- Factsheet for candidates
- The Representation of the People Order 2005 - election expenses
- Supply of register to candidates form
- Agents' meeting agenda
- Nomination pack
- Notes of agents' meeting and follow-up letter
- Arrangements for counting the votes

INFORMATION FOR PRESIDING OFFICERS

- Electoral Commission handbook and quick guide
- Supplementary instructions
- Guidance for tellers

INFORMATION FOR COUNT STAFF

- Instructions for Count Assistants
- Instructions for Count Supervisors
- Instructions for Zone Controllers and Control Clerks
- Count forms
- Electoral Commission guidance: 'Doubtful ballot papers – allowed votes' given to Zone Controllers

LAYOUT OF THE COUNT AREA

- Layout for the 2005 Parliamentary Election
- Layout for the 2001 Parliamentary election
- Blank layout of the hall to scale

ZONE CONTROLLERS' COMMENTS

- Comments from zone controllers on the count

ELECTION SURVEY

- Results of the survey sent immediately after the election to election agents and candidates by the Elections Office