Transcript – Computer Count Information Session

This information session is being held to provide an overview of the processes that will be followed after close of voting.

You can expect to gain an understanding of how ballot papers are managed, entered in to the VEC's computer system and a result calculated.

The information is specifically intended for candidates and others who will not be present during the computer count operation and for scrutineers who will be present so that all can participate fully in the process.

We will spend some time discussing the count process.

The legislation under which local government elections are conducted allows for the counting of votes electronically.

Our procedures have been developed in accordance with the provisions within the legislation.

The computer count application used by the VEC has been certified by an independent auditor.

This audit confirmed that the system conforms with the legislative requirements in relation to determining the result.

Our own experience and testing has shown that the results calculated by the computer count application are accurate.

The computer count system is used by the VEC where the result of the election is to be determined using: the proportional representation method of counting; or the preferential method of counting is used and there are large numbers of candidates and/or high enrolment; and for countbacks where the original result was determined by computer.

The main stages in the conduct of a count are: Preparation of ballot papers prior to the count, including the creation of batches in the computer count application so that batch cover sheets can be applied.

This process may be performed in one of two ways Either in two phases after close of voting and again after the close of the postal vote receipt period OR In one phase after close of the

postal vote receipt period once all ballot papers to be admitted to the count has been determined Entry of Preferences into the application Entry of ballot papers into the application will commence once batches have been prepared.

For some elections data entry will commence during the week following the close of voting and for the remainder data entry will not commence until the close of the postal vote receipt period.

Calculation of the result once all ballot papers are entered and full reconciliation completed An Availability of Results Guide will be made available at the count centre for any scrutineers.

It contains some specific information about what information is available during the count and at what times.

The election manager is responsible for overseeing the various stages of the computer count as follows: Prior to the count: extraction of ballot papers & establishing balance totals, delivery of the papers to the count centre, and briefing of the scrutineers. Scrutineers may be briefed by another authorised person if the election manager is not available.

During the count – the election manager has overall responsibility for the count process.

of voting This specifically includes re-checking all informal ballot papers before a result is calculated, explaining the process to those assembled for the result, After data entry and reconciliation completed the election manager will - press the calculate button on the computer, and - check the result reports.

Computer Count Team Leaders have a number of responsibilities: Prior to the count they are required to: verify the system configuration, create batches in the computer count application and print the batch cover sheets so they can be attached to the formal batches, set up the count site, reconcile all ballot papers upon their delivery to the count centre, and train Data Entry Operators (DEOs).

During the count they: manage ballot paper batches and monitor workflow, Perform quality assurance and supervise DEOs, distribute & collect batches of ballot papers, answer queries from DEOs, reconcile all completed batches, remove informal ballot papers from completed and reconciled batches ready for checking by the election manager.

Data Entry Operators are only responsible for the entry of ballot papers into the application.

Data Entry Operators have accurate keying skills and are experienced at numeric data entry.

All DEOs will have signed the relevant impartiality and disclosure documents prior to appointment.

Whilst the number of scrutineers allowed at the count is the same as for a manual count, some differences occur.

Scrutineers may: observe the entry of ballot papers into the computer system Where wanting to query a particular ballot paper or batch, record the batch number and, if possible, the paper number of the appropriate batch and advise the Computer Count Team Leader who will take the action necessary.

Scrutineers cannot interfere with the data entry operations; this includes entering into discussions with data entry staff.

The role of the scrutineer is covered in detail in the Scrutineers Handbook: Provided in candidate's kit Available for download from VEC website Available at the count centre For each election being counted, the election manager will confirm estimated times for Scrutineer briefing Commencement of entry of preferences, and Calculation of the result.

The preparation of the ballot papers for the computer count starts with the extraction process.

During extraction processes, ballot paper envelopes, in bundles of 50, will be run through a letter opener twice The first cut removes the declaration flaps without opening the envelope.

The number of declaration flaps and envelopes are balanced and the flaps packaged.

The second cut opens the envelope.

Ballot papers are extracted and the number of envelopes and ballot papers balanced.

While the extraction is taking place, the Computer Count Team Leaders will commence the creation of formal batches in the computer count application.

Formal batch cover sheets, with a batch identification number, will be printed.

They will then be provided to the Counting Team Leaders at the extraction to attach to each batch of formal ballot papers once extraction is complete.

The batch numbers are unique and sequential.

Each batch cover sheet records the election, the electorate, a sequential identification number and the number of ballot papers in the batch.

During the extraction any obviously informal ballot papers will be removed.

During the computer count the count application will detect less obvious informal votes during the data entry process.

Any informal ballot papers detected are removed and replaced with the same number of formal ballot papers to maintain the bundle balance at 50.

Informal ballot papers will also be bundled into 50s however only total number of informal ballot papers recorded The printed batch cover sheets will be attached to each formal batch of 50 and the batches packed for dispatch to the count venue.

A Computer Count Batch Advice Summary will be completed for each ward to provide to the Computer Count Team Leaders to advise of the number of papers being sent in the dispatch.

Here is a sample of the Computer Count Batch Advice Summary to be provided.

This will be placed in the first box of ballot papers for dispatch to the count centre.

A separate form will be completed for each ward being counted by computer.

On count day at the count centre, the process will generally be as follows At the beginning of the count Equipment is given a final check and Administrative tasks are completed.

During the count, for each ward being counted The scrutineers are briefed The ballot papers are received and the boxes are reconciled before they are opened and the batches then reconciled, Data Entry Operators are trained in the use of the Victorian Electoral Commission's computer count application, Preferences are entered into the system , and Final reconciliation activities occur.

Rest breaks will be taken from time to time.

Where a meal break is required, it will be staggered to ensure not all data entry operators go to lunch/dinner at the same time.

At the start of the count.

The number of boxes containing the ballot papers will be reconciled, with any discrepancies resolved.

Once the boxes are reconciled, data entry will occur for each election in-accordance with the timings provided.

At the advertised start time for each count, the security seals are removed and the boxes opened.

Scrutineers will be invited to inspect the security seals prior to their removal from the boxes.

The batches of ballot papers will be reconciled by the Computer Count Team Leaders against the advice provided by the election manager on the Computer Count Batch Advice Summary.

Once checking is complete, data entry can commence.

Batches of formal ballot papers will be allocated to data entry operators.

They may receive more than one batch at a time.

Batch allocation is recorded by the Computer Count Team Leaders.

The record includes the data entry operator's computer identifier and the unique batch number so that any batch can be traced at a given time.

Data entry operators will enter ballot papers under their batch identification number into the computer count application.

Ballot paper preferences are entered exactly as they appear on the ballot paper.

Data entry operators receive clear instructions to 'key it as they see it.

The Ballot Paper Entry Screen will look similar to this example.

The batch number is at the top of the screen along with the Ballot Paper Number.

As previously mentioned, where a scrutineer has identified an issue, they may note the ballot paper number and the batch number, then advise a member of the computer count team, who will bring the issue to the attention of the relevant person at the count.

The Data Entry Operator keys in preferences exactly as they appear on the ballot paper.

When all preferences have been entered for the current ballot paper, the DEO proceeds to the next paper, and so on, until the last paper in the batch has been entered.

At the end of the batch, a batch summary will appear.

The Data Entry Operator will check that the details are correct and if so will complete the batch cover sheet, and re-attach it to the completed batch which is then placed in a completed batch tray.

Only then will the Data Entry Operator save the batch issue, and then continue onto the next batch that has been issued to them.

The VEC's computer application has been configured to meet the formality requirements of the election.

Ballot papers that do not meet formality requirements will be identified by the application.

The system won't allow: No number one Duplicate numbers Numbers not in sequence Non-numeric characters Formality rules are detailed in the Scrutineers Handbook.

For example, where the data entry operator enters a ballot paper into the system that does not meet the formality requirements, the system will alert the user.

When the last preference is keyed into the system and the Next button selected, the computer displays a warning message.

As shown in this example, the operator has entered two 1s.

The data entry operator will check that the ballot paper preferences have been entered accurately.

If inaccurate, the operator is able to correct the entry and move onto the next ballot paper.

If the entry was accurate, the ballot paper is accepted as informal by clicking the Informal button.

The ballot paper will be removed from the batch at this stage.

The "Informal Papers" box will increase by one, the total papers will decrease by one, and the next ballot paper can be entered.

Ballot papers flagged as informal will be removed from batches once batch reconciliation is finalised.

It is important to note that all ballot papers identified as informal during the extraction process and those identified as informal by the computer are thoroughly re-checked by the election manager to confirm informality before a result is calculated.

The election manager will confirm the formality of these ballot papers during the count.

The election manager may also use personnel specifically trained in formality checking to assist in this task.

Any ballot papers deemed formal will be returned to the formal batches.

A first preferences report will be available periodically throughout the count.

This will detail the number of first preference votes for each candidate at the time of printing.

The cumulative number of first preferences counted will be printed and posted on a wall.

The Ballot Paper Details report.

may be generated for audit purposes a single batch at a time.

A full soft copy download of this report is available after the completion of the count.

Requests for this report can be made to the election manager.

Further information about these reports is available in the information booklet mentioned earlier.

Before a result can be calculated: All formal batches must be entered into the system All Informal ballot papers must be counted, and the number of informal ballot papers entered into the application.

Whilst reconciliations will take place progressively during the count, a final reconciliation will take place before the result is calculated.

The Computer Count Team Leaders will validate that all data entry has been completed and that there are no outstanding ballot papers for the count.

Note that final figures may not completely balance with the starting figures owing to: Ballot papers moving between formal and informal batches, or Adjustments made to the number of ballot papers in a batch due to more than 50 being identified in the batch during data entry.

The final check is the Confirmation screen.

The 'Confirm' button will not be enabled unless the Total Unentered Papers figure is zero.

Once final validation and reconciliation has been completed, a result can be calculated at the agreed time.

The election manager will address those assembled and explain the process that will follow.

The election manager will then press the calculate button on the computer.

The computer will then calculate and display the result.

The computer count application is able to identify candidates to be excluded, or surpluses to be distributed, based on the tallies for each candidate.

If 2 or more candidates are tied at the point of exclusion, or at the point of the distribution of a surplus, selection will be determined in accordance with the steps prescribed in legislation. The computer algorithm handles this automatically.

Calculation occurs relatively quickly.

The actual time will vary depending on the number of ballot papers in the count, the number of candidates, and the required number of distributions. The progress of the computer's calculation will be displayed on a large data projector.

As the result is calculated, the results will be displayed on the computer screen.

A distribution report will be available once the result has been calculated.

A copy of the Distribution Report will be printed and checked and copies will be distributed to scrutineers.

This report will provide detail of: The successful candidates Details of all exclusions (Preferential and PR counts) and surplus distributions (PR only) For elections where more than one calculation is to take place, the above process will be repeated until all calculation have been finalised.

At the conclusion of the count process, the election manager will confirm arrangements for the declaration of the result.