Aberdeenshire COUNCIL

Internal Review Report

Postal Voting Administration – Scottish Parliamentary Election 2026

Banffshire and Buchan Coast Constituency

Report prepared for: Jim Savege, Chief Executive and Returning Officer.

Review Lead: Martin Ingram, Elections Coordinator.

Subject: Postal voting administration for the Scottish Parliamentary Election 2026 within the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency.

Status: Final report signed off by the Returning Officer.

Report Date: 9 November 2026

Data protection and circulation: This internal report contains aggregated information derived from electoral administration records, including localised postcode and polling district analysis.

1. Executive summary

This report sets out the findings of an internal review of postal voting administration for the Scottish Parliamentary Election 2026 in the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency. The review was commissioned to establish the relevant facts, assess the robustness of arrangements for issuing postal ballots and replacement postal ballots, examine the handling of related complaints and enquiries and identify any apparent localised administrative or delivery issues.

The principal issue identified is a clear and significant concentration of reported non-receipt of postal vote packs in Peterhead South (BA0602) and Boddam (BA0603). Early reports came from the Towerhill, Wellington Drive and Mile End areas of Peterhead, with later analysis identifying 209 of the 225 non-receipt replacements within Peterhead South and Boddam and narrowing the issue to a defined first-run postal voter range.

Key figures should be noted at the outset. Banffshire and Buchan Coast had 14,780 postal voters. The review records 225 reissued replacement postal vote packs for reported non-receipt, with a further 26 electors reporting non-receipt but not receiving replacements because the information required to complete the statutory replacement process was not provided. Of the 225 non-receipt replacements, 209 were concentrated in Peterhead South and Boddam. By comparison, total replacement postal vote issues across all categories were 10 in Aberdeenshire East and 12 in Aberdeenshire West, against 228 in Banffshire and Buchan Coast.

The evidence points away from a postal voter data-transfer failure as the cause. Affected electors who contacted the Elections Team could be identified on the postal voter list and replacement packs could be issued through the system. Supplier information also indicates that the relevant postal vote packs were printed and dispatched in full. However, the available reporting does not provide item-level reconciliation for the affected packs.

Royal Mail has undertaken further review and has advised that no Mail Centre, Delivery Office or other operational issue was identified that would explain the circumstances reported by the Council. Royal Mail has also confirmed that Mailmark is not an item-level tracking service and does not provide Delivery Office, doorstep, delivery-point or postcode-level confirmation. Royal Mail's position therefore provides operational assurance, but not proof of delivery to each affected address.

The review records 225 reissued replacements for reported non-receipt in Banffshire and Buchan Coast, with a further 26 electors reporting non-receipt but not receiving replacements because the information required to complete the statutory replacement process was not provided. The scale and concentration of those reports require to be treated as material, even though the available evidence does not establish a definitive root cause.

On the evidence presently available, the strongest conclusion is that the Council can provide assurance up to the points evidenced by its own records and supported by supplier and Royal Mail information: data exchange, print production, dispatch, Royal Mail collection, transport and Mail Centre processing. The unresolved gap arises after the point at which current Royal Mail and Mailmark assurance confirms processing and before receipt by affected electors. The evidence does not permit the Council to attribute fault to any party. It does, however, identify a material assurance gap in the resilience and auditability of election-mail delivery arrangements.

The Returning Officer recognises that the reported non-receipt of postal vote packs caused inconvenience and concern for affected electors, particularly where voters had expected to use postal voting as their chosen method of participation. The Council responded by putting practical local assistance arrangements in place, including support through Buchan House (an Aberdeenshire Council Office based in Peterhead) and Customer Services for electors who required help with identity verification or replacement arrangements and by issuing replacement postal vote packs where the statutory requirements were met. These measures were intended to support affected voters while the Elections Team continued to investigate the underlying issue with suppliers and Royal Mail.

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2. Background and purpose

The Scottish Parliamentary Election took place on Thursday 7 May 2026. The Terms of Reference provide that the review period starts with publication of the notice of election on Monday 16 March 2026 and ends with declaration of results on Friday 8 May 2026.

The review was established following concerns that some electors in the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency had not received their postal vote packs. The objectives include confirming postal vote data exchanged between the ERO, Aberdeenshire Council and Idox; confirming postal packs printed by Adare and dispatched to Royal Mail; confirming receipt by Royal Mail and relevant delivery processes; confirming the number of complaints and replacement requests; mapping known replacement requests; and considering localised postal delivery or administrative processing issues.

For context, the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency had 61,536 registered electors for the Scottish Parliamentary Election 2026, of whom 14,780 were registered postal voters. Postal voters therefore represented approximately 24.02% of the constituency electorate. Against that context, the review considers the Council's records of 225 replacement postal votes issued following reports of non-receipt, together with a further 26 electors who reported non-receipt but did not receive replacements because the information required to complete the replacement process was not provided.

The Terms of Reference also require the review to consider what information on postal voting procedures and obtaining replacement postal vote packs was communicated to voters, whether it was consistent, timely, clear and accessible and whether it appropriately supported voters.

3. Scope

3.1 In scope

The scope of this report follows the Terms of Reference and includes:

- Data transfer between the ERO, Aberdeenshire Council and Idox, including any Idox suppliers and whether the available evidence indicates any completeness, accuracy or timing issue.
- Printing of Banffshire and Buchan Coast postal vote ballot packs by Idox or suppliers and subsequent transfer to Royal Mail, including evidence on production, reconciliation and handover.
- Receipt by Royal Mail and subsequent delivery processes for Banffshire and Buchan Coast postal vote ballot packs.
- Postal vote complaints, replacement ballot requests, localised issues and relevant internal logs or replacement records.
- Cross-reference and benchmarking against the other two constituencies administered by the Aberdeenshire Council Elections Team, as a comparable for scale.

3.2 Out of scope

The internal scope excludes polling station capacity and voter-flow planning, accessibility arrangements on polling day and wider lessons learned except where necessary to identify proportionate lessons directly arising from the evidence reviewed. The external scope excludes determination of the validity of the election result, investigation of alleged criminal offences, political conduct issues except where they directly affected postal vote administration processes and wider national policy questions except where local implementation choices or guidance directly affected postal vote complaints or replacement ballot processing.

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4. Methodology and evidence reviewed

The review methodology in the Terms of Reference includes records review, data review, targeted fact-finding discussions and factual accuracy checking. It also states that conclusions are to be based on available evidence and confirmed facts rather than hearsay or limited opinion.

Throughout this report, findings are therefore expressed by reference to the strength of the evidence available. Where the report records what the Council has been told by Idox, Adare or Royal Mail, this is described as supplier or Royal Mail information/advice. Where the Council has directly checked records or data, this is described as evidence reviewed or evidenced by Council records. Where the evidence does not establish a point definitively, the report records the matter as provisional, unresolved or requiring further reconciliation.

As part of the preparation of this report, the review process was subject to external oversight and constructive challenge from the Council's Chief Internal Auditor; the Electoral Commission's Senior Officer, Electoral Practice and Performance (Scotland); and the Chief Executive / Returning Officer for Falkirk Council. Their involvement provided independent assurance and informed the report's development. Responsibility for the report's findings, conclusions and recommendations remains with Aberdeenshire Council's Returning Officer.

For this report, the evidence located and considered includes:

1. Royal Mail correspondence, including Council updates on replacement issue volumes, postcode mapping references and Mailmark reports/eManifest data.
2. Correspondence with Idox and their print providers, Adare, including further replacement pack ordering and working assessment of affected elector ranges.
3. Records of individual replacement postal vote queries, issue types, areas and handling notes.
4. Records of postal votes re-issued for reported non-receipt for the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency, including comparison with other constituencies (i.e., Aberdeenshire East and Aberdeenshire West) administered by Aberdeenshire Council.
5. Messaging to postal voters on the poll cards; on instructions in the postal voting statement / mailer; and in information provided to the public by the Council on its website and through its communications and social media.
6. Internal Customer Services guidance on postal vote queries and replacement postal vote packs.

5. Factual chronology

The chronology below is organised by the date on which the relevant information was known to, or action was taken by, the Elections Team. Later review findings and analysis are addressed separately in section 6.

5.1 Pre-poll dispatch arrangements

The first issue postal vote dispatch dates would be between Wednesday 15 April and Friday 17 April for existing postal voters and those who applied by approximately 23 March. Final postal packs were dispatched to Royal Mail on Monday 27 April for those who applied by the 5pm deadline on Tuesday 21 April or changed existing arrangements.

The postal poll card for Banffshire and Buchan Coast stated that postal votes would be sent around Wednesday 15 April and that electors who had not received their postal vote by Friday 24 April should call the Election Helpline on 03456 08 12 08.

First-run postal packs were reported by the print supplier as having been handed over to Royal Mail on the night of Tuesday 14 April. The Council has been advised that the packs were trunked to Scotland, processed through sort centres on Wednesday 15 April and intended for delivery on Thursday 16 / Friday 17 April. The postal dockets were forwarded by the print providers on Tuesday 21 April. This section records the supplier/Royal Mail process information made available to the Council; it does not of itself evidence final delivery to each individual elector.

5.2 Initial reports of non-receipt

On Friday 24 April, the Banffshire and Buchan Coast Constituency Officer reported an increase in calls and voicemails from electors in the 01779-area code, covering Peterhead, Boddam and Cruden Bay. These contacts were being forwarded to the Postal Vote Opening mailbox. Initial reports identified electors in the Towerhill, Wellington Drive and Mile End areas of Peterhead as having reported non-receipt of postal vote packs.

The Elections Coordinator asked the PV Replacement Officer to raise the issue with Idox and confirmed that he would raise it separately with Royal Mail. The PV Replacement Officer clarified that five voters in the Towerhill area were affected and that she had issued two replacements elsewhere. The Banffshire and Buchan Coast Constituency Officer also forwarded details from a further Peterhead-area call he had taken.

The issue was reported to Idox's Elections Product Specialist on the basis that there appeared to be an issue with voters in the Towerhill area of Peterhead not receiving postal vote packs; five voters from that area had already contacted the Elections Team for replacements and had reported neighbours also not receiving postal packs. The Elections Product Specialist asked if the Royal Mail Mailmark reports could be checked to show the volumes that had been received and sent so far.

The same afternoon, the issue was escalated to Royal Mail, with reference made to affected voters in the Towerhill, Wellington Drive and Mile End areas of Peterhead. Royal Mail's Postal Voting Team initially advised that their Operations Team had been contacted and would investigate the reported issue.

5.3 Royal Mail initial response

On Monday 27 April, Royal Mail's Postal Voting team informed the Elections Coordinator that they had received a response from their Operations team, who advised that the Delivery Office was clear; that all postal vote packs received into the office had been delivered; and no issues had been reported to them.

The Elections Coordinator provided the PV Replacement Officer with the update from Royal Mail. The PV Replacement Officer informed the Elections Coordinator that they were continuing to receive calls from people not receiving their postal vote pack in the Peterhead area. The PV Replacement Officer had issued 16 replacements for reported non-receipt so far for Banffshire and Buchan Coast, which was high compared to the other two constituencies that Aberdeenshire Council had administered for these elections. It was also reported that there was a backlog of queries that an Elections Support Officer was assisting her with that day.

On Monday 27 April, practical mitigation options were agreed. Several electors did not have internet access and were therefore unable to email electronic copies of their identification. They were, however, willing to attend Buchan House so that Customer Services staff could check their identification and email confirmation to the PVO mailbox. That arrangement was operating effectively. The Banffshire and Buchan Coast Constituency Officer and Assistant Constituency Officer offered to help with this at the Service Point in Peterhead. The PV Replacement Officer confirmed that Customer Services was managing the arrangement effectively in the meantime.

Also on Monday 27 April, the PV Replacement Officer asked one of the Council's Project Managers, who had been assisting the Elections Team with preparations for the count, to get access to the PVO inbox so that she could assist with calls as well.

On Monday 27 April, there had also been subsequent runs of postal votes being issued – the second run having already been issued and the third run to be issued the following day - and the PV Replacement Officer enquired as to whether that was connected to the Peterhead issue or not. The Elections Coordinator checked whether the issue could relate to the subsequent batches of postal votes due to be issued and concluded that the second- and third-run spreadsheets did not include the affected voters in the early identified Peterhead-area clusters, so this did not appear to explain the reported issue in those areas.

Also on Monday 27 April, the PV Replacement Officer confirmed that more replacement postal vote packs for Banffshire and Buchan Coast would be required. Once up to date with the current replacement list, there would only be 12 blank packs left from an original allocation of 100 for that constituency until polling day. The Elections Coordinator thereafter ordered an additional print run of 100 blank packs from the print providers.

On Tuesday 28 April, the issue was reported by the Elections Coordinator to a scheduled Election Meeting with the Returning Officer and Depute Returning Officers. The Elections Coordinator advised that reports of non-receipt were continuing to be received from the Peterhead area and that initial enquiries had already been raised with Idox and Royal Mail. The meeting noted that replacement postal vote requests were being processed through the PVO mailbox and that arrangements were being used to support electors who could not email identification, including attendance at Buchan House for Customer Services to check identification and provide confirmation to the Elections Team. It was agreed that the Elections Team would continue to monitor the level and locality of reports, continue issuing replacements where the statutory requirements were met, maintain the Customer Services support route for identity-verification assistance and keep the position under review with the Returning Officer and Depute Returning Officers. This became the basis for regular oversight through scheduled election meetings, operational updates, monitoring of replacement volumes/locality and continuing contact with suppliers as the issue developed.

5.4 Urgent escalation of postal vote issue in the Peterhead area

By Thursday 30 April, a Council Customer Services Supervisor had contacted the Postal Vote Opening (PVO) team to highlight an increase in calls, personal visits and telephone enquiries from residents in Peterhead who reported that they had not received postal vote packs. Customer Services advised that the reports were concentrated in the Meethill and Towerhill areas of Peterhead.

On Thursday 30 April, the Postal Vote (PV) Replacement Officer contacted both the Elections Coordinator and the Banffshire and Buchan Coast Constituency Officer to ask whether the Council's Communications Team could be involved in preparing a press statement. In the meantime, the Customer Services team were advised to ask electors to email the PVO mailbox with proof of identity and their address. For those who could not email or did not have anyone to help them email, Customer Services would continue to suggest they take identification to Buchan House and the Customer Services team would then email the PVO team.

On Thursday 30 April, the Elections Coordinator asked the Communications Team Manager to prepare a draft social media post about postal votes. The draft was also shared with the Customer Services Manager. The agreed post advised electors who had not received their postal vote pack to contact the Elections Team by email or through the Election Helpline to arrange a replacement. It also advised that, if there was insufficient time to post a completed postal vote, it could be handed in at a polling station between 7am and 10pm on polling day. The post included a link to the Elections page on the Council's website and was shared on Facebook and WhatsApp that evening.

The communications response therefore developed in stages. Before the issue emerged, postal voters had already been advised through their poll cards to contact the Election Helpline if their postal vote had not been received by Friday 24 April. Once reports of non-receipt were identified, affected electors who contacted the Council were dealt with directly by the Elections Team through the PVO mailbox, Election Helpline and Customer Services route. As the pattern of reports became clearer on Thursday 30 April, wider public messaging was issued through the Council's social media channels and the existing elections web information was signposted. Customer Services staff were also provided with advice so that electors received consistent information on how to request replacements, provide identification and return completed postal votes.

On Friday 1 May, an Election Agent for one of the candidates standing in the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency contacted the Elections Coordinator asking for guidance on missing postal votes. They had a growing number of people say they had yet to receive their postal votes and asked what people could do. The Elections Coordinator directed the Election Agent to the social media post, which the Election Agent had replied to on Facebook and reiterated that the advice would remain as communicated.

5.5 Mailmark and supplier evidence

On Friday 1 May, the Historical eManifest report was uploaded to the Mailmark Supply Chain Reports. (NB: On Wednesday 29 April, the Royal Mail Mailmark Team had advised that the report would be live from the following day, i.e., Thursday 30 April.)

In terms of volume indicators, the eManifest Summary report provided that, from an overall declared volume of 45,757 across all three constituencies administered by Aberdeenshire Council, 44,927 were processed on time, 11 were processed later than expected and 820 were marked "Volume barcode not seen", with a volume discrepancy of 1. It is important to note that this 820 figure related to the Mailmark reporting for the combined mailing across Aberdeenshire East, Aberdeenshire West and Banffshire and Buchan Coast. It was not a Banffshire and Buchan Coast-specific figure and it was not a count of postal vote packs that had not been printed, issued or delivered.

The Royal Mail Mailmark User Guide provides that "Volume barcode not seen" includes items where Mailmark did not see the item or did not read the barcode through automation. The Elections Coordinator asked whether this could correlate with postal packs potentially not delivered and was informed that it did not directly mean that mail packs were not delivered. Instead, the explanation provided was that Royal Mail's automated sorting machines were unable to read or scan the barcodes on those items during processing, with those items then potentially proceeding through manual or lower-speed sorting routes. The Council has not been advised that print quality was identified by Royal Mail as the cause of the barcode-not-seen entries, nor has Royal Mail identified a specific reason why particular barcodes were not read. Given that the 820 figure related to all three constituencies and given the much lower level of reported non-receipt in Aberdeenshire East and Aberdeenshire West, the figure does not - on its own - explain the localised pattern of reported non-receipt in Peterhead South and Boddam. The available evidence therefore supports treating the 820 figure as a Mailmark processing/reconciliation exception requiring further explanation, rather than as direct evidence that postal vote packs were not issued or delivered.

Royal Mail's explanation, as relayed to the Council, was therefore that barcode-not-seen items are not necessarily missing from the postal stream. They may instead be items whose Mailmark barcode was not read by automation and which were then managed through manual or lower-speed processing by reference to the printed address. That explanation is consistent with treating the 820 figure as a processing and reconciliation issue. However, the Council has not received and Royal Mail has indicated Mailmark does not provide, item-level evidence showing whether any of the 820 items corresponded to the affected Peterhead/Boddam electors, nor whether any such items experienced delay.

5.6 Additional replacement pack contingency

Over the weekend of Saturday 2 May and Sunday 3 May, the Elections Team continued to deal with requests for replacement packs. The additional run of blank packs had been received on Friday 1 May. The PV Replacement Officer had been maintaining a Banffshire and Buchan Coast List of Postal Votes Reported Non-Received and that number, as of Sunday 3 May, was 138. The PVO team had 56 Banffshire and Buchan Coast replacements left, of which they were waiting for identification from 30 more people before issuing further Banffshire and Buchan Coast replacements. Assuming all 30 provided their identification, that would leave 26 remaining Banffshire and Buchan Coast replacements.

By Monday 4 May, the Elections Team had received subsequent inquiries from or on behalf of 11 more people – all of whom resided in the affected Peterhead areas. The ERO had also informed the Elections Coordinator that his office had received emails from postal voters in the Peterhead area advising that they had not received their postal vote packs. The number of those ERO emails was not separately quantified in the records reviewed for this report. The Elections Coordinator asked the ERO to continue forwarding such queries to the Elections Team, which would respond to them and arrange replacement postal vote packs as required.

On Monday 4 May, the Elections Coordinator asked the print provider's Head of Electoral Services whether a further batch of replacement postal packs could be ordered for urgent printing and courier dispatch, noting that 56 Banffshire and Buchan Coast replacements were left, 30 people were awaiting identification before further issue and 11 further enquiries had been received from or on behalf of people in the affected Peterhead areas. Later that day, it was agreed that a further 200 blank packs should be ordered. That evening, the print provider's Head of Electoral Services raised concerns that overnight Royal Mail delivery might not arrive in time. The Elections Coordinator agreed that a dedicated courier was necessary in the circumstances and it was arranged that these would be sent to Buchan House the following day.

5.7 Elections week

On Tuesday 5 May, the Elections Coordinator provided an update at the next scheduled Election Meeting with the Returning Officer and Depute Returning Officers. The Returning Officer raised this issue at the meeting of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland later that day and followed this up with an email to the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Electoral Commission. The Returning Officer confirmed that, by that stage, 161 replacement packs had been issued, with 33 further requests awaiting identification checks and 8 outstanding requests to attend to as of that morning; that additional staff had been deployed who were providing/hand-delivering replacement packs to those affected; and that, while initial inquiries had been carried out with Idox and Royal Mail, the focus would be on issuing and making sure replacement packs were provided. The Returning Officer also confirmed that the Council would issue further communications and social media updates that day and the following day.

The decision to focus on statutory replacement postal vote packs, rather than attempting a full reprint and reissue of the affected first-run postal vote packs, reflected the stage reached in the election timetable and the information available at the time. By Tuesday 5 May, polling day was two days away, the affected cohort had not been definitively established on an item-by-item basis and ordinary postal delivery of any wider reissue could not be relied upon to reach electors and allow completed votes to be returned before the close of poll. The statutory replacement process therefore provided the most practical and legally available route to support electors who reported non-receipt, while allowing identity checks, cancellation or supersession of the original postal vote where appropriate and local issuing or hand-delivery arrangements.

Further public messaging was issued during polling week to remind electors of replacement arrangements, return options and the need for postal voters to contact the Elections Team rather than attempt to vote in person at a polling station.

From Tuesday 5 May onwards, further contingency measures were put into place to deal with the issuing of replacement packs up to and including polling day. The Elections Team set up on-site re-issuing at Buchan House and an additional two Council Officers were redeployed to undertake hand delivery of replacement packs to affected voters in the Peterhead area.

On Wednesday 6 May, the Customer Services Team Leader contacted the Elections Coordinator to inform him that their advisors had not had any more calls. The Elections Coordinator advised that if their advisors did receive any further calls, they should continue to forward these on to the Elections Team to deal with them.

On Thursday 7 May - polling day - several postal voters appeared at polling stations seeking to vote in person. This appears to have reflected confusion among some postal voters and may have been contributed to by third-party social media posts suggesting, or being understood to suggest, that postal voters could attend polling stations to vote in person. The issue had been brought to the attention of Elections Teams across Scotland by the Electoral Management Board for Scotland. Polling staff guidance was used as part of the mitigation response: polling staff had been advised that, should postal voters appear at their polling station and seek to vote in person, they should be informed that they must contact the Elections Team so that arrangements could be made to provide them with a replacement postal vote where the statutory requirements were met.

The review has not identified a single contemporaneous total for the number of postal voters who attended polling stations on polling day seeking to vote in person. The evidence shows that polling staff were advised to direct such voters to the Elections Team so that the statutory replacement postal vote process could be considered. The Council's replacement records include replacements issued on polling day, but the current records do not separately identify how many of those were directly attributable to polling-station referrals, nor how many voters who were given that advice followed it. Future polling-station incident recording should therefore capture any postal voters attending to seek an in-person vote, the advice given, whether they contacted the Elections Team and the outcome.

The Communications Team Manager informed the Elections Coordinator that the Communications Team had received an approach from a newspaper about the postal voting issues in the Peterhead area. The Communications Team Manager shared an initial draft response for communication, which was agreed with the Returning Officer and issued later that afternoon. The response confirmed that the Council had issued around 200 replacement postal vote packs in the Peterhead area over the past week and had responded to all requests received up to and including polling day.

It is important to distinguish between what was known to the Elections Team as the issue developed during the election period and what was later established through post-election analysis. The following table summarises the development of the known facts, the actions taken at the time and the further position established during the review.

Stage / date	Facts known at the time	Actions taken at the time	Later established / reviewed position
Friday 24 April	Initial reports were received from the Towerhill, Wellington Drive and Mile End areas of Peterhead. Five Towerhill-area voters and two Wellington Drive-area replacements had been identified, together with a further Mile End-area report.	The issue was raised with Idox and Royal Mail and initial replacement postal vote packs were issued.	Later records showed that the issue was not limited to those early localities and formed part of a wider localised pattern in Peterhead South and Boddam.
Monday 27 April	Royal Mail advised that no Delivery Office issue had been reported. The Elections Team had issued 16 Banffshire and Buchan Coast replacements, which was high compared with the other constituencies administered by the Council.	Buchan House and Customer Services identity-verification support arrangements were considered and used. Additional replacement stock was ordered.	Later analysis confirmed a higher replacement level in Banffshire and Buchan Coast than in Aberdeenshire East or Aberdeenshire West.
Thursday 30 April / Friday 1 May	Increased calls and visits were being received from Peterhead residents, with reports concentrated in the Meethill and Towerhill areas. A candidate's election agent also raised concerns about missing postal votes.	Public communications were prepared and issued. Customer Services guidance was reinforced and electors were directed to the Elections Team to arrange replacements where appropriate.	Later evidence showed a clear postcode and polling district concentration in the Peterhead South and Boddam areas.
Sunday 3 May /	By Sunday 3 May, 138 non-receipt reports had been recorded. The team	A further 200 blank replacement packs were ordered and courier	Later figures showed 225 replacements issued for reported

Monday 4 May	had 56 Banffshire and Buchan Coast replacement packs remaining, 30 people were awaiting identification and 11 further Peterhead-area enquiries had been received by Monday 4 May.	delivery to Buchan House was arranged because ordinary overnight delivery was unlikely to arrive in time.	non-receipt, plus 26 electors who reported non-receipt but did not receive replacements because the information required to complete the replacement process was not provided.
Tuesday 5 May / polling week	By Tuesday 5 May, 161 replacement packs had been issued, 33 further requests were awaiting identification checks and 8 outstanding requests remained to be dealt with. The issue was escalated to the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Electoral Commission.	Additional staff were deployed. Local issue and reissue arrangements were established, including on-site reissuing at Buchan House and hand delivery of replacement packs in the affected area. Further public communications were issued.	Later mapping identified 209 of the 225 non-receipt replacements in Peterhead South and Boddam, narrowed to a defined first-run postal voter range within BA0602 and BA0603.
Post-election review	At the time, no confirmed root cause had been identified.	The review was commissioned and further evidence was sought from Idox, Adare and Royal Mail.	Data-transfer failure was considered unlikely. Supplier and Royal Mail assurances were received, but item-level reconciliation remains incomplete and the root cause remains unresolved.

In addition to the factual chronology above, the following table summarises the principal operational actions taken by the Council as the issue developed. This is intended to show how the response was adapted as the scale and locality of reported non-receipt became clearer.

Date / period	**Action taken**	**Purpose / effect**
Friday 24 April	Initial reports were raised with Idox and Royal Mail and initial replacement postal vote packs were issued.	Began investigation and ensured affected electors who contacted the Council could be issued replacements where statutory requirements were met.
Monday 27 April	Royal Mail's response was shared internally; the Buchan House / Customer Services identity-verification route was used; additional staff support was considered; and additional replacement stock was ordered.	Supported electors without email access and increased capacity to manage replacement requests.
Thursday 30 April	Customer Services guidance was reinforced, the Communications Team was engaged and draft public messaging was prepared.	Ensured frontline staff gave consistent advice and began wider public communication.
Thursday 30 April / Friday 1 May	Council social media messaging was issued advising electors how to request replacements and how to return completed postal votes.	Increased public awareness of replacement arrangements and available return options.
Sunday 3 May / Monday 4 May	Replacement stock was monitored; further Peterhead-area enquiries were assessed; and an additional 200 blank packs were ordered with courier delivery arranged.	Ensured sufficient replacement packs were available during the compressed polling-week period.

Tuesday 5 May	The issue was escalated to the Returning Officer / Depute Returning Officers and to the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, the Scottish Government and the Electoral Commission. Additional staff were deployed.	Ensured senior oversight and external stakeholder awareness while prioritising voter support.
Tuesday 5 May onwards	On-site reissuing at Buchan House was established and hand delivery of replacement packs was undertaken in affected areas.	Provided practical local support to affected electors and reduced reliance on ordinary post close to polling day.
Polling day	Polling staff were guided to direct postal voters seeking to vote in person to the Elections Team for replacement arrangements.	Managed voter confusion and supported use of the statutory replacement postal vote route.
Post-election	An internal review was commissioned; evidence was sought from Idox, Adare and Royal Mail; and replacement and postcode data were analysed.	Established the scale, locality and evidential limits of the issue and identified lessons for future polls.

6. Post-Election review

Following the election, the Returning Officer agreed that a more detailed internal review should be undertaken. The review considered each of the objectives set out in the Terms of Reference, namely data exchange, printing and dispatch, Royal Mail receipt and delivery processes, complaints and replacement requests, mapping of known replacement requests and possible localised postal delivery or administrative processing issues.

6.1 Confirming postal vote data exchanged between the ERO, Aberdeenshire Council and Idox

Following the election, the arrangements for exchanging postal vote data between the ERO, the Council and Idox were reviewed.

In advance of data being exchanged, a summary of extracts was provided by the ERO to Aberdeenshire Council, identifying the dates that postal voter uploads and Postal Voting Management System (PVMS) images would be uploaded to the Returning Officer for Idox. On the date of data exchange, the Depute ERO would email the Elections Coordinator to confirm that ballot pack data had been uploaded to a secure online file-sharing workspace and confirming the number of records that had been uploaded.

Equivalently, in advance of data being exchanged, a Key Milestones Timeline was provided by Idox to Aberdeenshire Council identifying the times and dates that they would require Absent Voter Data to be uploaded to their secure online web portal. The Elections Coordinator would upload the data to the secure online web portal; thereafter, a Data Report would be produced summarising the number of elector records that had been uploaded for that constituency contest, which would require to be signed off by the Elections Coordinator before being processed.

Had there been an issue with the postal vote data exchanged between the ERO the Council and Idox, it would have been expected that information regarding the affected registered electors would either be missing or in some way incomplete. However, upon review of the postal vote data exchanged between the ERO, Aberdeenshire Council and Idox, in every instance where a postal voter reported that they had not received their postal vote, the Elections Team were able to identify them as a registered elector on secure online file-sharing workspace and provide them with a PVMS replacement on the system.

On the evidence reviewed, no issue has been identified with the completeness or accuracy of the postal voter information supplied by the ERO to the Council; or subsequently by the Council to Idox.

The draft report was shared with the ERO for comment. The ERO confirmed that he had no comments on the content of the report at this stage and was content to discuss the issues raised and the proposed actions with the Elections Coordinator, Returning Officer and/or other relevant officers as required.

6.2 Confirming postal packs printed by Idox's print suppliers, Adare and dispatched to Royal Mail

Following the election, live and scanned inspection documentation was reviewed. The Council identified evidence confirming that postal packs printed by Idox's print suppliers, Adare, included postal packs within the range of postal voters reported as affected. This provides evidence that affected voter ranges were present within production documentation, but it does not, on its own, evidence the subsequent delivery path of each affected pack.

Further correspondence was entered into with Idox to share the information that had been collated as part of the Council's initial internal review so that a more detailed investigation could be conducted.

The Mailmark reports had previously been checked by the Elections Coordinator and the original Historical eManifest report (covering the first and second runs of postal votes) and a further Historical eManifest report covering the third run of postal votes was shared with Idox.

Idox forwarded this information to their printers, Adare, as they were the party directly involved in dispatching the postal packs to Royal Mail. Idox subsequently provided a response from Adare. Adare advised that the mail had been printed and dispatched in full and provided Aberdeenshire postal dispatch dockets. This is supplier assurance supported by dispatch documentation; the Council has not received and Royal Mail has indicated the Mailmark service does not provide, item-level Royal Mail scan or delivery evidence for each affected postal pack.

Adare advised that Aberdeenshire Council might be able to obtain a more granular report than those previously provided by the Royal Mail Mailmark Team of every item that had been scanned at the Aberdeen Inbound Mail Centre and advised that the Council should go back to Royal Mail and ask for this level of detail. Adare also advised that Royal Mail applies a tolerance for a proportion of Mailmark items not scanning, but that a failure to scan would not itself explain non-delivery. That is advice provided by Adare. Royal Mail has now clarified that Mailmark is not a tracking service, that it does not provide Delivery Office or doorstep scans and that available reporting does not break down to delivery point or postcode area. On the advice received, barcode-not-

seen items should instead proceed through manual or lower-speed sorting routes, with any impact more likely to be delay than non-delivery.

6.3 Confirming receipt by Royal Mail and relevant delivery processes

Following the election, further correspondence was entered into with Royal Mail, including the information that had been collated as part of the Council's initial internal review, so that a more detailed investigation could be conducted.

The Royal Mail Postal Voting Team was advised that 225 replacements for reported non-receipt of postal votes had been reissued in Banffshire and Buchan Coast and that a further 26 people had reported non-receipt but had not been issued replacements because contact details or follow-up information were not provided. These figures are evidenced by the Council's replacement and query records. Royal Mail was also advised that supplier evidence indicated the mail was printed and dispatched in full and that all Aberdeenshire postal dispatch dockets, together with the Historical eManifest reports covering the first/second and third print runs, were provided. A request was made for a more granular report of every item that had been scanned at the Aberdeen Inbound Mail Centre, so that the necessary level of detail could be obtained to help identify where the issue had arisen.

The Royal Mail Postal Voting Team advised that for any reports on Mailmark the Council should contact its printer as they have the agreement with them. They also noted that this was not a trackable service and referred to terms and conditions for Mailmark.

The Royal Mail Postal Voting Team also forwarded the shared information to their Operations Team and asked them to investigate. They subsequently advised that their Operations Team had confirmed that there had been no issues in the area and that the ballot packs were processed without delay and delivered the same day they entered the Delivery Office. This records Royal Mail's operational assurance; it is not item-level tracked delivery evidence for each affected elector.

Following further escalation, Royal Mail's Account Director-Public Sector confirmed that she had reviewed the investigation conducted during the May elections, discussed the matter with the Special Events Planner who led the investigation in collaboration with the Elections Team and sought a further update from operational colleagues regarding delivery performance. Royal Mail's further review did not change its original assessment. Royal Mail stated that its investigation did not identify any delays in processing election mail at the Mail Centre, that no operational delays or service issues were reported at the time and that further checks had not identified any operational issue that would explain the circumstances described by the Council.

Royal Mail also provided further detail on the limits of Mailmark reporting. It confirmed that Mailmark is not a tracking service and provides reporting based on Mailmark barcode reads at Mail Centre processing-machine level only. There are no subsequent scans at Delivery Office or doorstep level. Royal Mail advised that Mailmark PDF reporting is available to the account holder for a limited period, with Historic eManifest PDF reporting retained for 14 days and Mailmark Direct Data files available on the server for 7 days before deletion. Royal Mail further advised that Mailmark reporting data can only be viewed by the Royal Mail Mailmark Team via EIB analytics for a couple of months before removal from the system.

Royal Mail confirmed that the ballot packs for Aberdeenshire Council were collected from Adare in Huddersfield at 00:01 on Wednesday 15 April, transported on a dedicated route to Scotland and arrived at Aberdeen Mail Centre for processing. Royal Mail advised that the packs were processed ready for delivery on Thursday 16 April. Royal Mail stated that the delivery aim was 16 April, although items could still have been delivered on 17 April due to the volume of items arriving at the relevant offices.

Royal Mail advised that daily calls took place with the Special Events Team and operational leads during the election period to check delivery performance in each office and that spot checks can be conducted for the distinctive purple flash to ensure offices are clearing ballot packs. In response to the Council's query about "Volume barcode not seen", Royal Mail explained that this is an adjustment fee applied when machine data is checked against a sales order and that the mail has already been processed by that point. Royal Mail stated that any mail requiring manual processing would continue to be processed in line with the delivery aim of the service selected.

Royal Mail further advised that the available Mailmark reporting shows volumes processed but does not break this information down to delivery point or postcode area. Royal Mail stated that it had no reported delivery concerns in the areas provided by the Council, but that the areas of concern had been captured for future election monitoring. Royal Mail also confirmed that it maintains records of election-related enquiries and investigations to monitor areas of concern and support ongoing service improvement and that it will continue to work with operational colleagues to reinforce the importance of timely delivery of election mail ahead of future elections, including those scheduled for May 2027.

6.4 Confirming the number of complaints and replacement requests

Having reviewed the replacement PV queries list, a total of 163 queries were logged by the Elections Team where a replacement postal vote was requested by, or on behalf of, voters in the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency. It should be noted that of those 163 queries, a number of those were made by or on behalf of more than one voter from the same household.

In response to 143 of those queries, together with those further queries made by voters who attended polling stations on polling day and were directed by polling staff to contact the Elections Team in order to obtain a replacement postal vote, a total of 225 postal votes were re-issued to electors in the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency after they had been reported to the Council as not having been received. The remaining 20 queries related to 26 electors. In those cases, replacement postal vote packs were not issued because the Elections Team was unable to obtain the information required to complete the replacement process, most commonly proof of identity. Where contact details were available, the Elections Team responded to the enquiry.

The review has not identified evidence that any of the original postal vote packs reported as not received were subsequently received by electors, returned to the Council or otherwise reconciled individually. However, the Council's replacement records were designed to administer statutory replacement requests, not to track the later appearance or non-appearance of original packs. In the absence of item-level tracking or a post-event elector confirmation exercise, the review cannot state that every original pack was never seen. It can only record that the packs were reported as not received at the point when replacement requests were made and that no later evidence has been identified showing that the original packs subsequently turned up.

In addition to the Replacement Postal Vote Queries List, the Elections Team received a formal complaint from a voter whose address was in the Polling District of Peterhead South, who had not received her postal vote papers and was concerned that it would now be too late. The Elections Coordinator forwarded the complaint to the PVO team to deal with. While no phone number had been supplied, the PVO team emailed the voter requesting identification and offering home delivery/collection; unfortunately, a response was not received.

In addition, one further frontline complaint was received via the Council's Feedback System, regarding a customer whose address was in the Polling District of Boddam. The customer was dissatisfied that they had not received their postal vote pack and requested an explanation why. The Elections Coordinator arranged for the customer's concerns to be investigated and a response was provided directly to them via telephone using the contact details provided by them. It should, however, be noted that the customer's substantive issue was resolved and that the customer was provided with a replacement postal pack and was able to vote.

6.5 Mapping known replacement requests

To provide broader context for the scale of the issue, the following contextual electoral data is included. This allows the number of reissued postal votes and reported non-receipt cases to be considered alongside the total electorate, postal-voter population and postal-voter turnout, compared with the other constituencies administered by Aberdeenshire Council.

SPE 2026	Aberdeenshire East	Aberdeenshire West	Banffshire and Buchan Coast
Registered electors	62,556	61,255	61,536
Postal voters	15,474	15,887	14,780
Postal voters as percentage of electorate	24.74%	25.94%	24.02%
Postal voter turnout / postal votes returned	79% / 12,154	81% / 12,895	74% / 10,923
Overall turnout	55.78%	60.67%	48.06%

The final declared result for the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency is also included for context. Including the total votes cast, rejected ballot papers, valid votes, majority and turnout allows the scale of reported non-receipt and replacement postal vote activity to be considered alongside the outcome of the poll. This report does not assess the validity of the election result, which is outside the scope of the review, but the declaration figures provide relevant contextual information when considering the scale and materiality of the issue under review.

Declaration detail	Figure
Total votes cast	29,574
Rejected ballot papers	76
Valid votes	29,498
Turnout	48.06%
Winning candidate votes	10,374
Runner-up votes	10,010
Majority	364

The declaration figures have been included because they provide relevant context for the scale of the issue, including the majority of 364 votes. However, the figures relating to reported non-receipt and replacement postal votes cannot simply be treated as votes lost or as votes that would necessarily have been cast for any candidate. Of the electors who reported non-receipt, 225 were issued replacement postal vote packs; the 26 cases where replacement packs were not issued arose because the information required to complete the statutory replacement process was not provided.

Accordingly, this review does not conclude that the result was affected. Equally, it does not purport to determine the legal validity of the election result, which is outside the scope of this internal administrative review and would be a matter for the statutory election petition process. The appropriate conclusion for this report is that the issue was material and localised, required operational mitigation and should inform future assurance, escalation and communications planning.

The evidence supports the conclusion that routes to request a replacement postal vote pack were made available and publicised through poll card information, the Election Helpline, the PVO mailbox, Customer Services, Buchan House support arrangements, website information and social media messaging. Replacement packs were issued where electors contacted the Council and the statutory requirements were met. However, the review cannot demonstrate that every potentially affected elector saw or acted on those communications. In 26 recorded cases a replacement was not issued because the information required to complete the statutory replacement process was not provided.

Comparative information from the Scottish Parliamentary Election 2021 is as follows:

SPE 2021	Aberdeenshire East	Aberdeenshire West	Banffshire and Buchan Coast
Registered electors	64,059	60,081	58,816
Postal voters	18,112	17,746	16,176
Postal voters as percentage of electorate	28.27%	29.54%	27.50%
Postal voter turnout / postal votes returned	89% / 16,059	90% / 15,989	85% / 13,817
Overall turnout	64.25%	69.72%	56.23%

This comparative information should assist readers in distinguishing the localised issue under review from the overall administration and outcome of the election. It should also provide a more proportionate understanding of scale by showing the number of reported non-receipt replacement issues against the total electorate, postal-voter base and postal vote participation levels.

Based upon the replacement reports provided by Idox, the Elections Team issued the following number of replacements – with data shown for the Aberdeenshire East (AE) and Aberdeenshire West (AW) constituencies as well as for the Banffshire and Buchan Coast (BBC) constituency for context.

Replacements – Scottish Parliamentary Election 2026

Report Date	AE	AW	BBC
27/04/26	2	2	8
28/04/26	2	0	16
29/04/26	0	2	15
30/04/26	0	0	25
01/05/26	1	1	31
05/05/26	3	1	46
06/05/26	0	3	32
07/05/26	2	0	24
07/05/26 Polling day up to 5pm	0	3	31
TOTAL	**10**	**12**	**228**

(Please note that the 'Report Date' relates to replacements issued on the previous working day, except for the final report date, which relates to replacements issued on polling day up to 5pm.)

The difference between Banffshire and Buchan Coast and the other two constituencies is stark even on raw replacement totals. Banffshire and Buchan Coast recorded 228 replacement postal vote issues, compared with 10 in Aberdeenshire East and 12 in Aberdeenshire West. This comparison should be treated with some caution because the constituencies differ in electorate size, number of postal voters, geography and postal-voter profile. However, even allowing for those differences, the scale of the difference provides useful context and supports the conclusion that the issue in Banffshire and Buchan Coast was unusual and localised rather than simply reflecting ordinary background replacement activity across the election.

Of the 228 replacements issued for the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency, 3 were spoilt and returned for cancellation; the remaining 225 were "lost" or "not received"; for the purposes of this review, these are treated as reports of non-receipt unless otherwise stated.

Of the remaining 225 replacements issued in Banffshire and Buchan Coast for postal vote packs reported as not having been received, 209 were found to be within the Polling District of Peterhead South (BA0602) and Boddam (BA0603). Following analysis of the Marked Register for the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency, this was subsequently narrowed to a defined first-run postal voter range within BA0602 and BA0603. Further analysis of the postal vote extracts provided by the ERO also showed that the issue only appeared to have affected the first run of postal votes issued and not either of the subsequent runs.

For data protection purposes, the detailed postcode-level analysis has been aggregated below into concentration bands. This preserves the evidential point that reports were localised and clustered, while avoiding publication of small-count postcode units that could potentially be linked with electoral administration records or local knowledge.

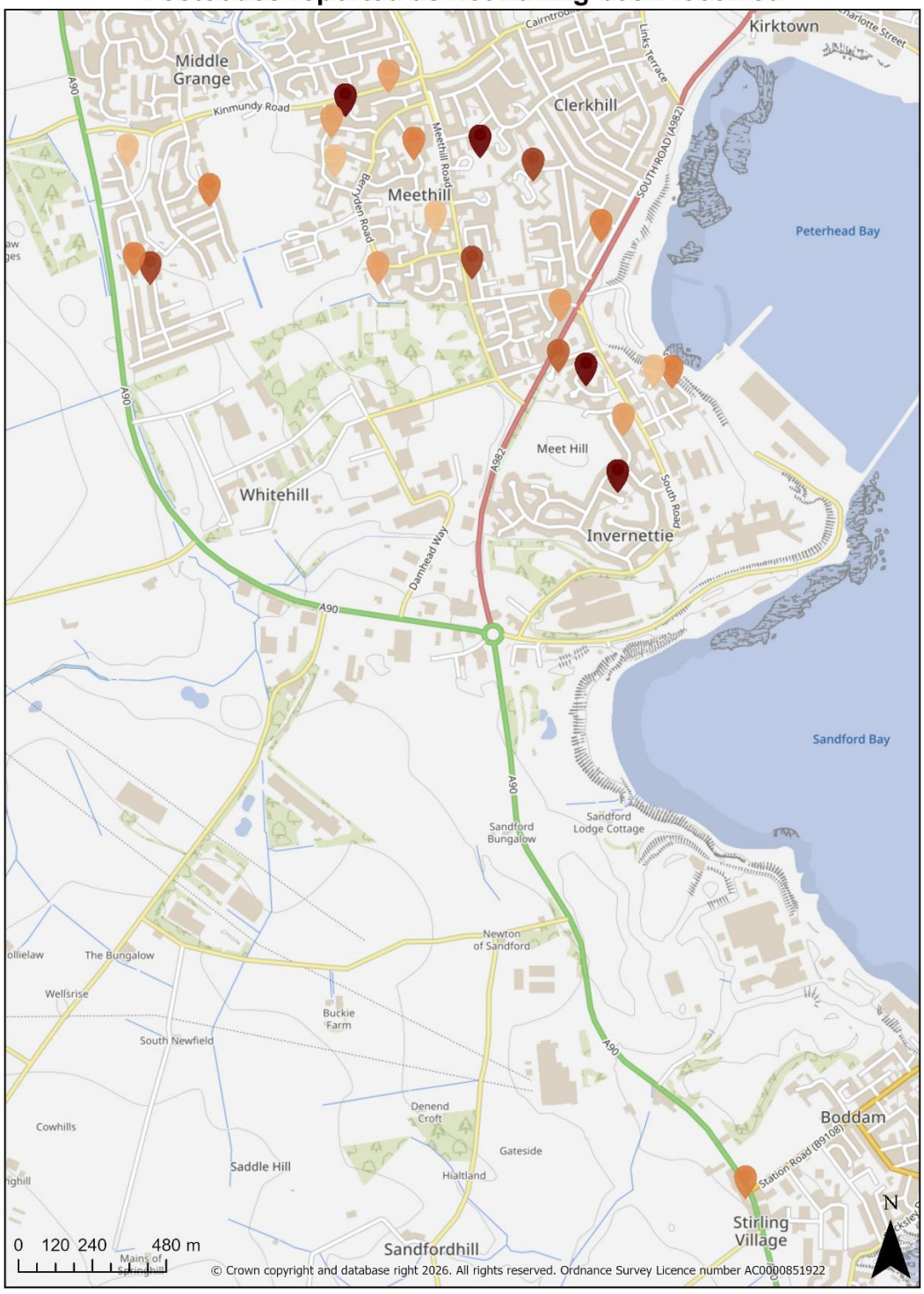
Postcodes where postal vote packs were reported as not having been received

Concentration band	Localised postcode units	Reported non-receipt cases
Highest concentration	**4**	**48**
High concentration	**10**	**67**
Moderate concentration	**9**	**45**
Low concentration	**38**	**65**
Total shown in aggregated analysis	**61**	**225**

*(**Data protection note:** The granular postcode-level analysis has been aggregated in this version to reduce identifiability risk. The underlying postcode-level working data has been retained as restricted operational evidence where necessary for internal assurance, follow-up with suppliers and future election planning.)*

The mapping exercise confirmed a localised concentration of reported non-receipt within the affected Peterhead South and Boddam areas, consistent with the aggregated postcode analysis above.

Postcodes reported as not having been received



Aberdeenshire COUNCIL

6.6 Considering localised postal delivery or administrative processing issues

At this stage, the evidence identifies a localised pattern of reported non-receipt and enables assurance to be provided up to a defined point in the process. Data transfer, print production, dispatch, Royal Mail collection, transport to Aberdeen Mail Centre and Mail Centre processing have either been evidenced by Council records or supported by supplier and Royal Mail assurance. Beyond that point, however, the current Royal Mail and Mailmark systems do not provide item-level, postcode-level, Delivery Office, delivery-point or doorstep evidence capable of demonstrating delivery to the affected addresses.

A further response has now been received from Royal Mail's Account Director- Public Sector. That response confirms that Royal Mail reviewed the investigation conducted during the May elections, discussed the matter with the Special Events Planner who led the investigation with the Elections Team and sought a further operational update. Royal Mail's position remains that no delays were identified in election-mail processing at the Mail Centre, no operational delays or service issues were reported at the time and further checks did not identify any operational issue that would explain the circumstances described by the Council. Royal Mail also confirmed that the relevant Aberdeenshire ballot packs were collected from Adare in Huddersfield at 00:01 on Wednesday 15 April, transported on a dedicated route to Scotland, arrived at Aberdeen Mail Centre for processing and were processed ready for delivery on Thursday 16 April. The delivery aim was Thursday 16 April, although some items could still have been delivered on Friday 17 April due to volume.

Royal Mail's response provides additional assurance about its operational review and clarifies the evidential limits of Mailmark data. It does not, however, provide item-level tracking or postcode-level reconciliation capable of confirming the delivery path of the affected postal vote packs. The Council's current position is therefore that the localised pattern of reported non-receipt is clearly evidenced; that no data-transfer, supplier dispatch or Mail Centre processing issue has been identified; and that the remaining unexplained stage is the later postal delivery chain after the point at which current Mailmark assurance ends. This is not a finding that Royal Mail caused the reported non-receipt, but it is a finding that the current systems do not provide sufficient granular assurance to reconcile a localised election-mail issue of this nature.

7. Analysis and findings

Finding 1 – There was a clearly evidenced localised pattern of reported non-receipt in the Peterhead / Boddam area.

The evidence demonstrates that the issue was not spread evenly across the constituency. This is evidenced by Council replacement records, internal correspondence and locality analysis. Early reports were concentrated in the Towerhill, Wellington Drive and Mile End areas of Peterhead, with additional references to continuing Peterhead-area calls and later working assessment that the issue affected a defined first-run postal voter range within BA0602 and BA0603.

The Replacement PV Queries List contains numerous entries for Banffshire and Buchan Coast that were reported as not having been received in locations within the Polling Districts of Peterhead South and Boddam.

Conclusion: The evidence supports a finding that reports of non-receipt were materially concentrated in parts of Peterhead South and Boddam. The evidence does not support a conclusion that the issue was constituency wide.

The review has not identified evidence of fraud or any allegation requiring criminal investigation. The statutory safeguards relevant to replacement postal votes, including identification requirements and cancellation or supersession of original packs where appropriate, were part of the operational response. The issue is therefore treated in this report as an assurance, resilience and voter-access matter rather than as a fraud finding.

Finding 2 – The current evidence does not confirm a data-transfer failure.

The review evidence currently indicates that affected electors who contacted the Elections Team could be found on the list of postal voters. The available evidence supports the assessment that a data issue was unlikely because all electors who contacted the Council about non-receipt could be identified on the postal voter list.

The second- and third-run explanation was considered and discounted for the early identified affected localities because the second- and third-run spreadsheets did not include the affected voters.

Conclusion: On the evidence reviewed, a data-transfer failure between the ERO, the Council and Idox was unlikely to have been the cause of the reported non-receipt. Affected electors who contacted the Elections Team could be identified on the postal voter list and replacement packs could be issued through the system.

Finding 3 – Supplier production / dispatch evidence indicates full print and dispatch, but granular reconciliation remains incomplete.

The correspondence records that Adare advised the mail was printed and dispatched in full and that Aberdeenshire postal dispatch dockets had been provided. However, that is supplier assurance supported by dispatch documentation rather than independent item-level delivery evidence. The Mailmark report referenced a declared volume of 45,757 with 820 items marked "Volume barcode not seen" and clarification was sought as to whether this could correlate with reported non-receipt of postal vote packs.

The 820 "Volume barcode not seen" figure should be understood as a Mailmark automation/reconciliation exception across the combined three-constituency mailing, not as evidence that 820 Banffshire and Buchan Coast postal packs were missing, unissued or undelivered.

Royal Mail advised that Mailmark was not a trackable service and that reports should be obtained via the printer because the printer held the relevant agreement.

Conclusion: The evidence currently supports a provisional finding that production and dispatch were reported by the supplier as complete and that dispatch documentation has been provided. The available dispatch, eManifest, Mailmark and replacement records do not provide item-level reconciliation and a definitive finding on the delivery path of each affected pack cannot be made from the evidence available.

Finding 4 – Royal Mail's further review did not identify an operational issue but did not provide item-level or postcode-level reconciliation.

Royal Mail initially advised that Operations had confirmed the Delivery Office was clear, that all postal votes received into the office had been delivered and that no issues had been reported. Following further escalation, Royal Mail confirmed that it had reviewed the investigation conducted during the May elections, discussed the matter with the Special Events Planner and sought a further operational update. Royal Mail advised that no delays were identified in processing election mail at the Mail Centre, no operational delays or service issues were reported at the time and further checks had not changed the original assessment of delivery performance.

Royal Mail confirmed that the Aberdeenshire ballot packs were collected from Adare at 00:01 on Wednesday 15 April, transported on a dedicated route to Scotland, processed at Aberdeen Mail Centre ready for delivery on Thursday 16 April and had a delivery aim mainly on 16 April, with some items potentially delivered on 17 April due to volume. Royal Mail also clarified that Mailmark is not a tracking service, that Mailmark reporting is based on processing-machine barcode reads at Mail Centre level only and that it does not provide Delivery Office or doorstep scans. It also confirmed that the available reporting does not break down to delivery point or postcode area.

Conclusion: Royal Mail's further review provides clearer operational assurance and confirms that no Mail Centre or local operational issue was identified or logged at the time. However, because the service was not tracked at item level and Mailmark does not provide Delivery Office, doorstep, delivery-point or postcode-level tracking, Royal Mail's assurance does not fully reconcile the Council's evidenced localised pattern of reported non-receipt. The best appraisal available is that assurance can be provided up to collection, transport and Mail Centre processing, but not to the later delivery stage at the level required to demonstrate delivery to the affected addresses.

Finding 5 – Replacement postal vote arrangements were actively managed and adapted during the issue.

The evidence shows that the Elections Team processed replacements, used Buchan House to support electors who could not email ID, considered assistance through the Peterhead Service Point, monitored remaining replacement pack stock and arranged for additional replacement packs to be printed and couriered where necessary.

The review also notes that the use of replacement postal vote packs was a proportionate operational choice at that stage of the timetable. A wider reprint and reissue would have required a clearly defined affected cohort, sufficient time for issue and return and assurance that reissued packs would reach electors before close of poll. Those conditions were not present once the scale and locality of the issue became clearer during polling week.

Conclusion: The operational response was active, pragmatic and adapted as the scale and locality of the issue became clearer. However, the Returning Officer should consider whether pre-defined escalation thresholds, localised replacement-issue procedures and clearer real-time recording would strengthen future resilience.

Finding 6 – Communications to voters included poll card, postal pack and Customer Services messaging, but the Returning Officer should assess consistency and accessibility.

The postal poll card advised postal voters that they would not be able to vote in a polling station and that they should call the Election Helpline if they had not received their postal vote by Friday 24 April.

The postal voting statement told electors that postal votes had to be received by 10pm on Thursday 7 May; that they could be handed in at any polling station in the constituency or at the office before 10pm; and that replacements could be requested up to 5pm on polling day, with additional hand-return requirements after 5pm on Wednesday 6 May.

The Customer Services Quick Guide included deadlines for registration and postal/proxy applications; Postal Vote Opening team contacts, including the email address for the PVO mailbox; the Elections helpline and email address; and Constituency Office contacts.

Conclusion: Communications to voters were available through several channels, including poll cards, postal vote pack instructions, Customer Services guidance, website information and social media updates. The core messages were broadly consistent in advising electors how to seek assistance, request replacements and return postal votes. Communications were actively used and adapted as the issue developed, including corrective messaging around postal voters attending polling stations. However, the evidence does not demonstrate that all potentially affected electors were reached or that all affected electors understood the replacement process, identification requirements, deadlines and limits on voting in person. Future arrangements would be strengthened by a pre-approved localised communications protocol covering website and social media updates, Customer Services scripts, candidate and agent briefings, polling-station guidance, replacement procedures, identification support, collection/issue arrangements and hand-return options.

The social media post issued on Tuesday 5 May provides some evidence of reach. It recorded a reach of 15,544 and had been shared 27 times. While this was lower than the equivalent post issued the previous week, which recorded a reach of 27,081 and 33 shares, it nevertheless represented a strong level of engagement for messaging on the Council's social media profile, particularly given what the Communications team have advised is a high number of shares; this indicates that people were sharing the post with others they thought would be interested, so in this case it would be expected that many of these shares were towards those in affected areas.

These figures demonstrate dissemination of the messaging, but do not establish how many affected electors received or understood it.

The matter also drew media attention and the Council responded to queries from the Daily Mail, BBC and Press and Journal. The Council's comments focused on the fact that the situation was being reviewed and the number of replacement packs that had been issued.

The evidence also shows that polling-week communications and polling staff guidance were used to address confusion or misinformation about whether postal voters could vote in person at polling stations. Future communications protocols should include pre-approved corrective messaging where misinformation or voter confusion is identified during the poll period.

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8. Data limitations and caveats

- **Evidence status.** This report distinguishes between matters evidenced directly by Council records; supplier or Royal Mail assurances provided to the Council; and matters which remain unresolved because item-level reconciliation is not available from Mailmark reporting and has not otherwise been provided.

- **Complaint, enquiry and replacement categories require reconciliation.** The evidence distinguishes 'complaints', 'reports', 'queries', 'enquiries' and 'replacement requests' but households may have generated one enquiry covering multiple electors.

- **Mailmark is not item-level tracking.** Royal Mail confirmed that Mailmark reporting is based on barcode reads at Mail Centre processing-machine level only and that there are no scans at Delivery Office or doorstep level. It also confirmed that Historic eManifest PDF reports are only retained for 14 days and Mailmark Direct Data files for 7 days before deletion, with Royal Mail Mailmark Team analytics retained only for a limited period.

- **The root cause remains unresolved.** Royal Mail's further review did not identify an operational issue and supplier information indicates production and dispatch in full. However, the available evidence does not provide item-level or postcode-level reconciliation for the affected postal vote packs and therefore does not establish a definitive explanation for the localised pattern of reported non-receipt.

- **Fraud and election-petition context.** The review has not identified evidence of fraud or any allegation requiring criminal investigation. It also does not assess the legal validity of the election result, which would be a matter for the statutory election petition process. The review has considered the result and majority only as contextual information for assessing scale, materiality and future assurance planning.

- **Assurance gap in later-stage delivery.** The evidence allows assurance to be provided up to collection, transport and Mail Centre processing. It does not allow assurance to be provided at the later Delivery Office, walk, delivery-point, postcode or doorstep stage. The most reasonable inference from the current evidence is that any issue arose after the point at which current Mailmark assurance ends, but the available systems do not allow that inference to be confirmed at item level.

- **Limitations in analysing the requests.** The report uses replacement requests and non-receipt reports but not every affected elector will have reported; some may not have voted, some may just have not reported or done so in a way not captured. Only reported incidents could be analysed and the actual numbers of affected electors cannot be determined from the records alone.

- **Polling-station referral data.** The review has not identified a separate quantified record of postal voters who attended polling stations seeking to vote in person, the advice given to each voter, or whether each voter followed that advice. Future incident logging should capture polling-station referrals relating to postal vote replacement requests, including the polling station, time of referral, advice given, whether the voter contacted the Elections Team and the outcome.

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9. Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Define complaint / query / replacement request categories for future election logging.

For future polls, establish a common categorisation framework distinguishing:

- formal complaints;
- voter enquiries;
- non-receipt reports;
- replacement requests;
- replacement issued;
- replacements not issued and reason;
- duplicate household enquiries; and
- second replacement requests.

This is suggested to distinguish formal complaints from voter queries resulting in service requests and the evidence shows uncertainty around household enquiries and replacement totals.

Recommendation 2 – Introduce a live locality dashboard for postal vote non-receipt reports.

A live dashboard or spreadsheet should record locality, polling district, date/time of contact, channel, number of electors in household, identification status, issue outcome, dispatch/collection route and whether follow-up was required. This recommendation is supported by the evidence that the issue was identified through clusters in the Towerhill, Wellington Drive, Mile End and wider Peterhead / Boddam areas and that localised mapping was later prepared.

Recommendation 3 – Agree escalation thresholds with suppliers before the poll.

Before future polls, the Elections Team should agree escalation thresholds for unusual volumes of non-receipt reports by postcode, polling district or dispatch batch, including named contacts and expected evidence returns from print suppliers and Royal Mail. This should include clarity on what evidence can realistically be provided within the retention periods for Mailmark, eManifest and any direct-data reporting and recognition that Mailmark does not provide Delivery Office, doorstep, delivery-point or postcode-level tracking. The protocol should also make clear the point in the postal process at which assurance is available and the point after which more granular delivery-stage assurance is not available through current systems. This recommendation is supported by the need to seek further evidence from Idox; their print suppliers, Adare; and from Royal Mail / Mailmark once the pattern emerged.

For future polls, the term “dispatch confirmation” should be defined in advance. It should include, where available, confirmation of the date and time each dispatch batch was completed; the number of postal vote packs in each batch; the constituency, polling district or data extract covered by each batch; reconciliation against the elector data supplied; confirmation of handover to Royal Mail or courier; dispatch docket or manifest references; Mailmark or eManifest references; and identification of any rejected, held, spoiled, duplicated, cancelled, returned or otherwise excepted items. The expectation should also distinguish between evidence of production, evidence of handover, Mailmark/eManifest scan information and any later delivery-office processing assurance, including the limitations of each form of evidence.

Recommendation 4 – Maintain contingency replacement stock and local issuing arrangements for high-risk or remote areas.

Minimum contingency stock should be set, with a documented trigger for additional print orders and a procedure for local collection or identification verification through appropriate Council premises. This is supported by evidence that Banffshire and Buchan Coast replacement stock became a live operational concern and that further packs required to be arranged through print suppliers.

Recommendation 5 – Strengthen public and customer-service messaging when localised non-receipt is identified.

Prepare pre-approved messaging for customer services, website, social media and candidates/agents explaining:

- how to request a replacement;
- ID requirements;
- deadline for issue;
- whether collection is available and from where;
- what postal voters can and cannot do at polling stations; and
- how to return completed postal votes by hand.

This would be supported by poll card and postal pack wording that already contains key messages and by operational evidence that Customer Services and Service Point staff became part of the mitigation response.

Recommendation 6 – Confirm finalisation route and revisit unresolved evidence before SLG2027 planning is completed.

The Returning Officer has finalised this report based on the evidence available at sign-off, while expressly recording the residual uncertainty around the root cause. Any substantive further evidence from Idox, Adare or Royal Mail received after finalisation should be considered through a short addendum or management update. The findings and any additional evidence should then be revisited no later than two to three months before the Scottish Local Government Elections 2027, so that the learning is embedded in supplier assurance, escalation, contingency and communications planning.

Considering Royal Mail's further response, any addendum or management update should not be dependent on Royal Mail providing item-level tracking where the service selected does not support that level of evidence. Instead, future assurance work should focus on obtaining and preserving available Mailmark, eManifest, dispatch, receipt and operational-monitoring evidence within the relevant retention periods and on agreeing in advance what level of breakdown can and cannot be provided if a localised issue is reported.

The draft report has been shared with the ERO, who confirmed that he had no comments on its content at this stage and was content to discuss the issues raised and proposed actions with the Elections Coordinator, Returning Officer and/or other relevant officers as required.

Recommendation 7 – Raise national electoral assurance issues and share wider learning.

In addition, the Returning Officer should raise with national electoral colleagues whether current postal voting arrangements provide sufficient granular assurance for election-critical mail. The key future question is whether Returning Officers require more detailed assurance where a localised pattern of non-receipt is reported, such as earlier access to available Mailmark/eManifest data, clearer retention arrangements, delivery-office level assurance, postcode or walk-level exception reporting, or other mechanisms capable of supporting electoral assurance where participation may be affected.

The Elections Team will also consider whether the circumstances and lessons learned should be developed into a short case study for the wider electoral community. Any such case study should focus on practical learning around early identification of localised non-receipt, escalation, evidence preservation, replacement-issue arrangements and voter communications.

10. Action plan

The parameters, ownership and success measures for these actions should be developed further as part of planning for the next scheduled election. The action plan below therefore identifies the intended purpose and expected outcome of each action, with detailed procedures, thresholds and templates to be finalised through the next-election planning process.

No.	Action	Owner	Timescale	Evidence / expected outcome
1	Define and adopt standard categories for election incident logging, distinguishing formal complaints, voter enquiries, non-receipt reports, replacement requests, replacements issued, replacements not issued and reasons, duplicate household enquiries and second replacement requests.	Elections Team	Before next scheduled poll	Provides clearer management information and avoids uncertainty around the relationship between complaints, queries, household enquiries and replacement totals.
2	Create a live locality dashboard or spreadsheet for postal vote non-receipt reports, recording locality, polling district, date/time of contact, reporting channel, number of electors in household, identification status, issue outcome, dispatch or collection route and follow-up requirements.	Elections Team	Before next scheduled poll	Supports earlier identification of clusters by postcode, polling district or dispatch batch and reduces the need for post-event reconstruction from emails, spreadsheets and separate lists.

3	Agree supplier and Royal Mail escalation thresholds before future polls, including named contacts, evidence to be requested, retention-period requirements, internal notification routes and decision points for local contingency measures.	Elections Team / Suppliers / Royal Mail	Before next scheduled poll	Ensures unusual volumes can be escalated quickly and that available dispatch, Mailmark, eManifest and operational evidence is requested and preserved within applicable retention periods.
4	Set minimum contingency stock levels for replacement postal vote packs and document triggers for additional print orders, courier arrangements, local issue, collection and identity-verification support through appropriate Council premises.	Elections Team / Suppliers / Customer Services	Before next scheduled poll	Maintains capacity to respond where replacement stock becomes a live operational concern and reduces reliance on ordinary postal delivery close to polling day.
5	Prepare pre-approved communications for Customer Services, website, social media, candidates, agents and polling staff covering how to request a replacement, ID requirements, issue deadlines, local assistance options, postal-voter polling station restrictions and hand-return arrangements.	Elections Team / Customer Services / Communications	Before next scheduled poll	Provides clearer, consistent and timely advice when localised non-receipt is identified and helps address voter confusion or misinformation during the poll period.

6	Record the residual uncertainty at sign-off, establish a process for any addendum if substantive new evidence is received, keep the ERO updated on any material developments and revisit the findings and any additional evidence before SLG2027 planning is completed. The ERO has confirmed that he has no comments on the report's content at this stage and is content to discuss the issues raised and proposed actions with relevant officers as required.	Returning Officer / Elections Team / ERO	At report sign-off and no later than two to three months before SLG2027	Ensures the unresolved evidence position is not left open-ended, that relevant internal stakeholders are updated and that learning is embedded in supplier assurance, escalation, contingency and communications planning.
7	Raise with national electoral colleagues whether current postal voting arrangements provide sufficient granular assurance for election-critical mail and consider developing the circumstances and lessons learned into a short case study for the wider electoral community.	Returning Officer / Elections Team / National electoral stakeholders	Before SLG2027 planning is completed	Supports consideration of more granular national assurance for election mail and shares practical learning on early identification, escalation, evidence preservation, replacement arrangements and voter communications.

11. Overall conclusion

The evidence reviewed supports a balanced conclusion that there was a material and localised pattern of reported non-receipt of postal vote packs affecting parts of Peterhead South and Boddam within the Banffshire and Buchan Coast constituency. The pattern was identified during the postal voting period and the Elections Team responded by processing replacement postal vote requests, using Buchan House and Customer Services support where electors required assistance with identity verification, arranging additional replacement stock and engaging with Idox, Adare and Royal Mail.

By way of summary, the operational response included the following reassurance points. Requests received by the statutory deadline were actioned where the statutory requirements for issue of a replacement postal vote were met. Additional staffing and replacement-pack capacity were deployed once the scale of the issue became clearer. Arrangements were adapted quickly as the localised pattern in the Peterhead South and Boddam areas emerged, including local support through Buchan House and Customer Services. Affected electors were offered practical routes to obtain replacement postal vote packs, including assistance where they could not email identification documents themselves.

The evidence reviewed supports the conclusion that a data-transfer failure between the ERO, the Council and Idox was unlikely to have been the cause of the reported non-receipt. Electors who contacted the Elections Team about non-receipt could be identified on the postal voter list and replacement packs could be issued through the system. Supplier information provided to the Council indicates that postal vote packs were printed and dispatched in full. Royal Mail has now undertaken a further review and has advised that no Mail Centre, Delivery Office, staffing, workload, transport, weather, routing, equipment, automation, walk-sequencing or administrative issue was identified that would explain the circumstances described. Royal Mail also confirmed that the packs were collected from Adare at 00:01 on Wednesday 15 April, transported to Aberdeen Mail Centre, processed ready for delivery on Thursday 16 April and had a delivery aim on 16 April, with some delivery on 17 April due to volume. However, those are supplier and Royal Mail assurances rather than complete item-level reconciliation of the affected packs and they do not fully explain the localised pattern of reported non-receipt evidenced by the Council's replacement and query records.

No definitive root cause has therefore been established. The additional Royal Mail response narrows the unresolved position by confirming that assurance can be provided up to collection, transport and Mail Centre processing and by confirming that no operational failure was identified or logged at the time. It also confirms that Mailmark cannot provide item-level, postcode-level, Delivery Office, delivery-point or doorstep delivery evidence. The review does not attribute fault to any party in the absence of evidence sufficient to support such a conclusion. However, the best appraisal available from the evidence and current systems is that the issue arose after the point at which Royal Mail and Mailmark assurance can confirm processing, but before receipt by affected electors. The review therefore identifies an assurance gap in the resilience and auditability of election-mail delivery arrangements and proportionate improvements are required to strengthen future arrangements, including clearer real-time logging, defined escalation thresholds, supplier assurance arrangements, preservation of available Mailmark/eManifest evidence within retention periods, contingency replacement stock planning and public and customer-service communications.

On the evidence presently available, the unresolved cause is recorded as a residual uncertainty rather than left open-ended. If further substantive evidence is received after finalisation, the Elections Team will prepare a short addendum or management update setting out whether that evidence changes the findings, recommendations or planning assumptions.

In practical terms, the residual uncertainty will be carried into planning for the Scottish Local Government Elections 2027 and shared with relevant national electoral colleagues. The findings and any subsequent supplier or Royal Mail evidence will be revisited no later than two to three months before the next major election, so that any unresolved risk is reflected in supplier assurance requirements, escalation thresholds, contingency replacement arrangements, communications planning and local support arrangements. The key national planning question remains whether postal voting arrangements require more granular assurance for election mail where a localised pattern of non-receipt is reported. On that basis, no separate interim report is required unless significant new evidence is received that materially changes the factual assessment or requires earlier governance consideration.